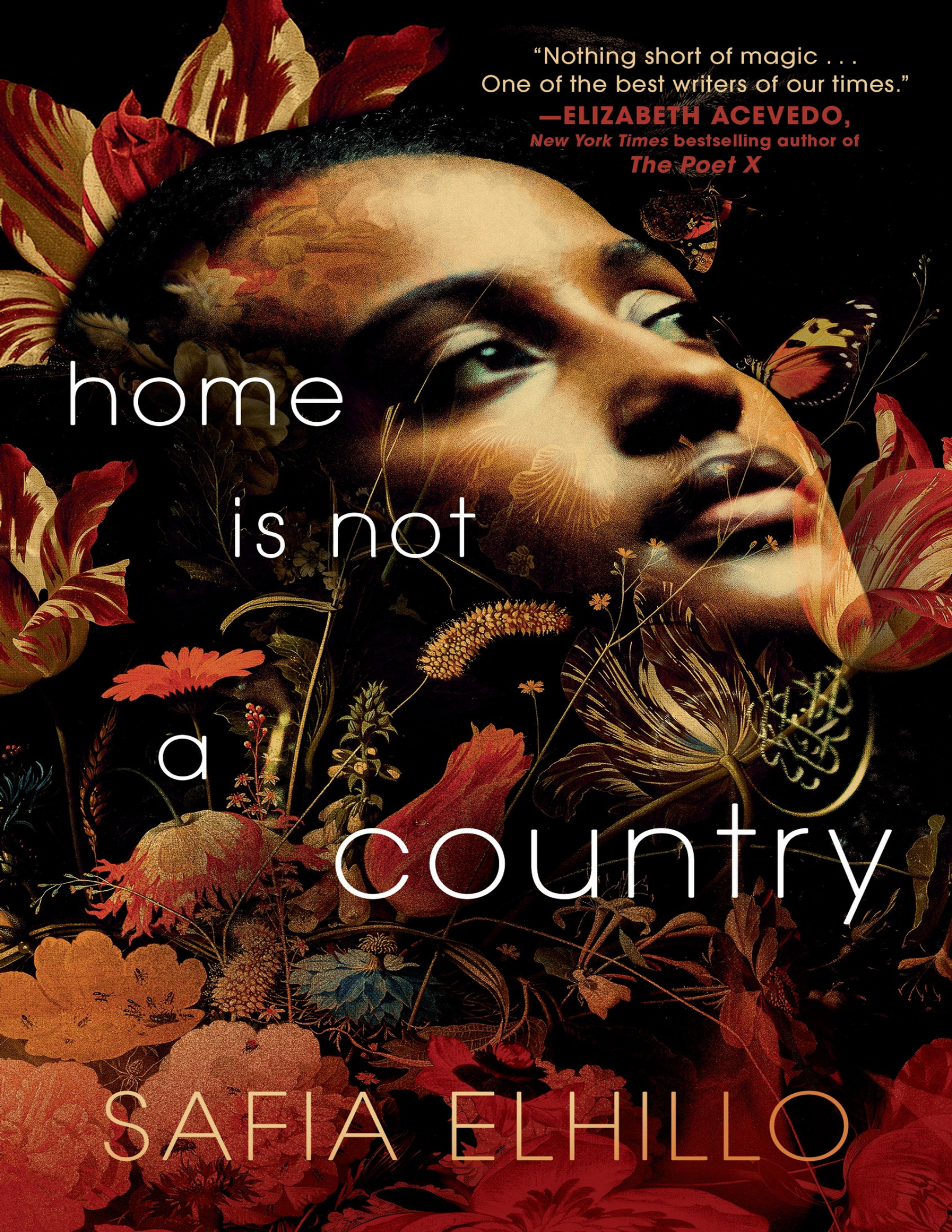
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One of the best writers of our times."
—ELIZABETH ACEVEDO,
New York Times bestselling author of
The Poet X
home
is not
a
country
SAFIA ELHILLO

home is not a country

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MAKE ME A WORLD
New York

MAKE ME A WORLD is an imprint dedicated to exploring the vast possibilities of contemporary childhood. We strive to imagine a universe in which no young person is invisible, in which no kid's story is erased, in which no glass ceiling presses down on the dreams of a child. Then we publish books for that world, where kids ask hard questions and we struggle with them together, where dreams stretch from eons ago into the future and we do our best to provide road maps to where these young folks want to be. We make books where the children of today can see themselves and each other. When presented with fences, with borders, with limits, with all the kinds of chains that hobble imaginations and hearts, we proudly say—no.

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Acknowledgments
About the Author

To my communities. To Awrad & Basma. You are my country.

Dear Reader,

The truth is, this is just one life of many you could have led.

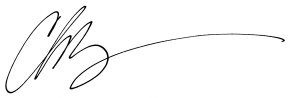
At some point you made the choice to pick up this book, but you could have chosen something else to do. Before that there were other decisions—you chose to walk down one street or another, to take the bus, to talk to that stranger. Even earlier there were decisions made before you were born, decisions that have profoundly affected who you are right now, what language you speak, where you live, even how you dream.

It seems to me that this knowledge—that you could have just as easily been any one of a hundred other people—is at the heart of empathy. It's the realization that every person you meet, or see on the news, or hear about could have been you, if you had made slightly different choices, or if your grandparents had made different choices, going way back, into a great tree of different choices that looks like an entire world of people who aren't you, but might have been.

Some people have the gift of understanding that they could have been other people; Nima is one of them. She understands that her own life is just one branch of a tree, and the seeds that became her could have just as easily become someone else. She rides her nostalgia and the strange here-and-there-ness that is every immigrant's story to full visions of who she should have been if…And maybe we fantasize that we would be happier as that other person, or that we could run faster, or be more loved.

So many stories are about just this thing, the fantasy of what it would mean to be someone else. All the lions and wardrobes, all the kids with secret powers, even the cats in hats. But what they fail to realize is that just as much as there are the many people we could have been, these people live in the corners of imagination and, perhaps, they are wishing that they could be us.

Welcome, then, to Safia Elhillo's *Home Is Not a Country,* a tree of identities, of who we are and who we could be, and the dangerous and beautiful place in between.



Christopher Myers

PROLOGUE

NEW COUNTRY

The Photograph

in a lifetime before mine my parents
not yet my parents only a slim girl
the color of cinnamon skirt swirled liquid
about her knees as she dances eyes cast
downward smiling shyly at a boy
who mirrors her movement to the song the little
gap in his front teeth cigarette tucked
behind an ear & shirt unbuttoned down his chest
sepia hand longing for her waist frozen
immortal in the photograph wondering
if they will ever touch

Baba

the photographs of my father are everywhere

alone in a suit framed in the living room

seated with his afro full taped to the mirror of my mother’s dresser

in the one on the coffee table he stares awestruck at his bride

a passport picture in mama’s wallet a single furrow in his brow

i like the ones of him younger rounded & serious as a child

dusty-kneed as a teenager crowded with other boys around a ball

before the car crash that took him from knowing me

before the father-sized ache before my mother all alone

still crowding herself to one side of the bed saving his place

soft browns of the sepia photos
making him impossibly far away

Mama

in this photo my mother is alone
as i will come to know her

it is her wedding day back home
a lifetime right before mine before
the new country & the widowing
& the worry lines stamped into her brow

her eyelashes painted dark beneath
a headdress of silver coins
strung across her forehead
& her hands floating up to fix
the arch of her headscarf
soil-colored blooms of henna
twisting from both elbows to
each finger

a different country a different
life the henna since faded
& the story hushed to memory
to old bits of song from oceans away

we are no longer back home
the headdress has been sold & my mother
is alone is at work is rushed
in her headscarf & blue jeans

& it hasn’t been her wedding day in years

her name aisha means *she who lives*
but mostly she goes to work & comes home tired
& watches television & sometimes
in the television’s blue glow
her eyes make tears that do not fall

i keep this photograph in a tin box
that once held butter biscuits
long ago eaten by guests unimpressed
with our spare american living

Haitham

we've always known each other
our mothers friends from back home
bound into some ancient sisterhood
of grief his mother the only one
who can make my mother laugh

but when i really meet him when
we enter a siblinghood of our own
i am wearing the first new coat i have ever
owned & we are both entering the age that
makes our elbows feel larger than the rest
of our bodies

the wal-mart lights are cold & harsh
blunt squeak of his shoes against
the polished floors nothing left of
my mother's date-palm trees his
mother's riverbank only suburban

america no matter how far
we strain our eyes our mothers
share a shopping cart & speak shy
quiet english testing new words

like *coupon* & *value-pack* his
polo shirt hangs loose about him

years before the shoulders
to come & all they’ll have to carry

later at the bus stop our mothers
fish for change at the bottoms
of their worn handbags he lifts
the hem of his shirt just a little
to show me a pack of stolen starburst
tucked into the waist of his jeans

are you going to tell? he whispers
& i shake my head thrumming
with excitement & fear a grin
stretches across his face *good*
he begins unwrapping the candy
because half of these are yours

School

i’ve never felt like i was good at anything
haitham for all his atrocious grades
is at least good at people while i am a solid
b minus in every class & barely scraping
a passing grade in any social interaction
muttering & burdened by the shadow of an accent
that i cannot manage to make charming

at school haitham & i separate for the day
he’s repeating ninth grade & we now have
different lunch periods where i sit with
an assortment of others all citizens of
the social margins & though assembled
we do not talk we poke glumly at our wilted lunches

i long ago begged mama to stop packing
leftovers for me to take to school the smell alone
one morning filled the entire bus despite
my seat in the back where i waited
for everyone to pile out through the folding doors
before slumping outside myself throwing away
the offending plastic container of okra & lamb & rice
before anyone could know it was mine

now instead i make my own dejected sandwiches
damp in their paper towels two pieces of untoasted

white bread & between them a single slice
of plasticky american cheese

America

i go to halfhearted arabic classes each sunday
in a rented room at the middle school & bleat
alef baa taa thaa & agree with
haitham who sits behind me that this is *like*
so boring

we never ask why our mothers had come here
& could not let it go though i always beg
for the same crumpled photograph stories of
weddings that went on for weeks cafes crowded
with poets gardens lush & humming
with mosquitoes

we whisper to each other *if it's so great there*
then why don't we ever go back

but i have always listened to the stories
& every day i long at school i still
do not speak i wear the same
fleece sweatshirt washed & rewashed

the girl who sits behind me in math
came over once to work
on a project told everyone after
that it smelled *like rice & dirty plants*
wondered aloud if my mother

was bald under the headscarf

in my silence i dress myself
in yellow & imagine
a garden thick with date palms

a girl mouth open & fluent
who knows where she is from

Yasmeen

my mother meant to name me for her favorite flower
its sweetness garlands made for pretty girls
for parties to be worn thick in heavy hair

instead i got this name & i don't even know why
maybe named for some unknown dead relative
some dreary ghost so of course no one wants me
at their party their sleepover their after-school trip to the mall

of course i fade to the back of the classroom the photos
& in the hallways no one looks my way some days i walk to school because the bus driver does not see me at the stop
& when i spot my homeroom teacher in the supermarket
she glances & squints like she isn't quite sure who i am

i imagine her yasmeen this other girl bright & alive
mouth full & dripping with language easy in her charm
& in essence she looks like me but of course
better nails unbitten & painted turquoise her hair
unknotted & long ears glittering with stud earrings
not like mine thick with keloid from an infected piercing

i imagine her back home fathered beloved
knowing all the songs & all their corresponding dances
laughing big & showing all her teeth
invited to all the parties

called to from across the street by classmates by teachers
jewel of the neighborhood & somehow
a little taller than me
like there are extra bones in her spine
like everyone knows her name & i ache
to have been born her instead

Nostalgia Monster

haitham calls me a *nostalgia monster* & likes to laugh
at the dream-brain that takes over mine when i hear
the old songs & run my fingers
over the old photographs i know the words
to the old films & imagine myself gliding in
to join the dance glamorous in black & white
photographed in sepia frozen in a perfect time

i wish our arabic teacher would tell us more
about what it was like back then before everyone
left when they were young & dreaming
& hearing the songs crackling out of a radio
but i cannot imagine him young or dancing
cannot imagine him any way except the way we know
him now scowling over conjugations & how
we mispronounce the language how it wilts
on our american tongues

one of my favorites is a sayed khalifa song
where he sings to a girl he calls a pearl necklace
يا عقد اللولي لولي
يا بنت يا حلوة يا لولي

& says وين الحلوين وين راحوا
where are the beautiful ones where did they go
& i think he means us all the ones who left

all the gone

My Name

nima well really it's نعمة *ni'ma*
mispronounced at school to sound like
the middle of the word *animal* or stretched
into a whining *neema* no letter in english
for the snarling sound that centers my name
its little growl ع

nima meaning *grace* it would be funny
if it weren't cruel i stumble over my own overlarge
feet & knock over the clay incense holder its coal
burning a perfect circle into the wooden table i brush
an uncoordinated elbow past the counter & the tray
holding tea for guests a full set of dishes teapot & milk jug & sugar bowl
& saucers & matching cups painted
with tiny flowers goes crashing to the tiled floor
i trip on the carpet's hem & fall chipping a tiny corner
of my bottom front tooth & in calling my name
in exasperation my mother calls for the grace i don't have

PART 1

THE OTHER SIDE

The Airport

once when i was small we packed a shared suitcase
of bright cotton floral prints & something yellow
& silken i'd never seen my mother wear
& for the trip across the country she wore perfume
& her best red beaded scarf & we clattered
into the terminal my mother collecting all the light

a wedding on another coast its promises
of sunlight & gold & her scattered schoolmates
& cousins & faraway friends all crowded
into a rented hall making it with color
& incense & song our country
& it all shone in my mother's face

we approached the counter to check in the family
ahead of ours handed their boarding passes with a grin
before the agent turned to us & his smile clicked shut
said *check-in is closed* & no
there is nothing he can do
& no there is no manager to call & please can we leave
this counter is now closed

my mother's faltering voice the soft music in her english
her welling eyes her wilting face her beaded scarf
& all she said was *please please i have a ticket*
& i'd never seen her so small english fleeing her mouth

& leaving her faltering frozen reaching for words
that would not come dabbing at her eyes
with the scarf its red so bright so festive
like it was mocking us

& all i could do was reach for the suitcase with one hand
her limp arm with the other & wheel us to the exit
& in our slow retreat i heard the last snatches
of that man's joke his colleague's barking laugh
no way we're letting
mohammed so-and-so near the plane
& that's why we don't go anywhere anymore

Mama

my mother is so often sad so often tired & wants mostly
to sit quietly in front of the television where we watch
turkish soap operas dubbed over in arabic
their sweeping landscapes & enormous romances
until she falls asleep
chin pointed into her chest & glasses askew

on bright days she plays music pitches her voice high
& sings along to all the ones we love abdel halim
& wardi & fairouz sayed khalifa & oum kalthoum
gisma's open throaty voice & frantic percussion
to which mama claps along tries sometimes to teach me
the dances the body formed like a pigeon's
the chest arced proudly upward head twisting helixes
against the neck in a surprise to no one i cannot dance
but love to watch her love that she tries anyway
to teach me

& sometimes rarely by some magic the movement
will click fluently into my body & she'll ululate & clap
while i twist my head in time to the song mama's voice
celebratory & trilling *my nima* *my graceful girl*

Haitham

is smaller than me three weeks younger & always
a little disheveled always dressed in something that
someone else wore first & laughs
the most enormous sound

haitham passes me a drawing during arabic class
full-color cartoon on the back of a worksheet
of our horrible teacher spit flying from his
large mouth with a speech bubble that reads
WE ARE NOT AMERRICANS! YOU SPEAK
ZE ARRABIC! eyes bulging & his bald patch
glistening in the light

i press my fist over my mouth to keep the laugh inside
& it builds until i think my eyeballs might burst
until the sound threatens to come pouring from my
ears from my nose until my face is wet
with tears

& haitham swipes the drawing crumples it
into his notebook right as the teacher turns
& thunders over spits a little while asking
what *on earth* (the only way teachers are allowed
to say *the hell*) what on earth is wrong with me
i only manage to choke out *allergies*
& haitham from the row behind offers me

a tissue with a grin

Pyramids

once in arabic class excited that the new girl's name
luul reminded me of the song i love the pearl necklace

i sang a little of it when she introduced herself
& watched her smile falter confused before she finally

excused herself & by the end of the day everyone
was giggling *nima loves old people's music pass it on*

so even here among my so-called people i do not fit
here where the hierarchy puts those who have successfully

americanized at the top i've marked myself by caring
about the old world & now i hover somewhere

at the bottom of the pyramid (while our arabic teacher drones about
ancient times & the little-known fact

that *our country has 255 pyramids remaining today*)
the bottom of the pyramid with those recently arrived

dusty-shoed & heavy-tongued & though i'm born here
though my love of the old songs & old photos

doesn't translate to my spelling my handwriting
my arabic pronunciation or grammar or history

or memorization of the qur'an i recognize

in their widened eyes that feeling that shock

of being here instead of there

Haitham

lives in my building which isn't actually surprising
since it seems everyone from our country immigrated
to this same block of crowded apartments

it's saturday morning & he's ringing the doorbell
frantic & falls inside when i answer
sweaty & rumpled & still in his house shoes coughing
with a little joke in his eye

his grandmother opening his t-shirt drawer to put away
the laundry found his secret pack of cigarettes which
he doesn't even really smoke which he tried to explain
away while dodging the slippers aimed at his head
who knew mama fatheya was so athletic
everything always so funny to him
she chased him out with cries of
DISKUSTING! DISKUSTING! & where else
was he going to go

my mother hasn't left yet for work & makes us tea
boiled in milk poured into mismatched mugs
& hands us packs of captain majid cookies she gets
from the bigala that haitham & i call ethnic wal-mart
where we buy everything from bleeding legs of lamb
to patterned pillow covers & cassettes
covered in a layer of dust

she never seems old enough to be anyone’s mother
so pretty & unlined & smelling always of flowers
she clears the cups & wipes the crumbs from the table
& our faces in quick movements pins her scarf
around her face & leaves for work

haitham isn’t wearing shoes so we cannot go outside
we instead spend the day playing our favorite game
calling all our people’s typical names out the window
into the courtyard *mohammed!* *fatimah!* *ali!* *bedour!*
to see how many strangers startle & look up
when they are called

Haitham

haitham's grandmother once asked us suspicious
what do you two do all day? & by the middle of the list
had already turned her eyes back to the television
as haitham continued to list our every microscopic act
music videos snacks monopoly
even though half the cards are missing five-dollar tuesdays
at the movie theater after school
concan even though nima thinks i cheat
& we don't really know the rules
& in truth i do not know what we really do
with our time together
because it's always been like this
my every day is filled with haitham
his laughter pulling my own to join it
our nonsense jokes & riffs
& misremembered lyrics & laughing & more laughing
i see him every day & somehow still have so much to tell him
every time one of us rings the doorbell to the other's apartment
& crosses the threshold already beginning whatever story
already unfolding whatever thought & he's never
joined the other kids in making fun
of all my strangeness makes it feel instead
like a good thing
even when he calls me *the nostalgia monster*
he makes it sound like a compliment

full of affection & pure joy has never
made me feel that there is anything wrong with me at all

An Illness

through the bathroom door i hear haitham singing loudly
in the shower stretching each note with a flourish

i perch next to mama fatheya on the couch
while she watches intent

as a woman on the television pulls a glistening chicken
from the oven i am so bored & haitham

is taking his time the mantel above the television
is crowded with photographs

haitham's mother khaltu hala younger & first arrived
her hair cut short & eyes haunted

haitham a bundle in her arms *mama fatheya,*
tell me about back home she glances up from

her program irritated at first & then softening
nostalgia is an illness, little one she says gently

turning back to the television but continues
ours is a culture that worships yesterday over tomorrow

but i think we are all lucky to have left yesterday
behind we are here now

dissatisfied i press on *wait, you actually*
like it here? & she faces me again a sadness hitched

behind her eyes *here i have lost nothing i could not*
afford to lose

just as haitham squawks the last notes to his song
& shuts off the shower i look at the lost country

in mama fatheya's face & recognize it
from my own mother's face the face of every grown-up

in our community a country i've never seen
outside a photograph

& i miss it too

Haitham

always laughing & pulling laughter from anyone he meets
has interests that keep him here instead of dreaming
of a lost world for a while he tried to get me
to play video games but i could not make myself care
& now i mostly sit on the plastic-covered couch
& watch him play while i daydream & when he's done
or tired of losing he'll put on one of the old movies
from the box under his grandmother's bed though by now
we've watched them all dozens of times we each
pick a favorite character & recite all the dialogue
long since memorized & squawk off-key
to all the songs though secretly we are each belting
them out in earnest

i think that secretly he loves
this old world almost as much as i do

Khaltu Hala

haitham's mother her hair cut close around her ears
though in the old pictures she wore it long puffed out
around her shoulders curls halfway down her back

i like her her gruffness & briskness & her short bark
of a laugh the books shelved floor to ceiling
in the little apartment each one of them hers
traced for years by her fingers until the ink
began to gray the way she coaxes a smile
from my mother & clears the shadow from her face
the way she growls out every letter of my name
in approval how i can't imagine her ever afraid
though when she is home we don't watch the old films
or sing the old songs or ask too many questions

my mother never talks about it except the one time
after khaltu hala heard me humming the song
about the pearl necklace & eyes bulging
voice hoarse told me to leave & go home
knocking gently on our door hours later
a little pearl ring passed from her hand to mine
her embrace bright with the smell of oranges & soap
apology muffled by my sweatshirt's thick fabric

that night my mother voice hushed told me
about the officers that cut khaltu hala's hair the long scars

striped down her back the thousand things
she will not talk about in hopes of erasing
that whole country & starting again here
brand-new & i almost wish she hadn’t told me
& for weeks after i did not want to listen
to the songs & every photograph looked sharper & ugly
& gave off the faintest smell of copper of blood
& now i mostly try to forget the story & return to loving
the dream of home & the pearl never leaves my finger

Mama

though the story about khaltu hala hurts i do not
want my mother to stop telling stories she who

so rarely tells anything at all i ask
about my grandmother *loved flowers* about

my mother as a young girl *i wanted to be*
a dancer & when i ask about my name

she frowns a little squinting as she chooses
the words *i had a whole other name picked out,*

did you know? but when your father died
i don't know it felt like that name belonged to him

& i couldn't bear to keep it without him so i picked
something else & i feel that old pang of being

second-best to that other girl my ghost-self

yasmeen

Overheard

my mother has guests over & i am hiding in my room
humming to myself & looking through my tin box
of artifacts the photographs again my mother as
a painted bride my parents dancing i put the pictures
away the cassettes & hear my mother calling me
to greet her guests *hello* *fine thank you*
i'm almost fifteen *school's fine*
arabic's fine *alhamdulillah* *you too*
& i duck back into hiding

& i hear khaltu amal with the tattooed eyebrows
who is not actually my aunt & who always smells like ghee
purring to my mother *she could be such a pretty girl*
& my mother mourning my unkemptness *sometimes*
she won't even brush her hair & i don't know why
she insists on wearing that sweatshirt all the time
i have to pry it away to wash & khaltu amal again
her cloying voice *remember when we were girls?*
the daughters we imagined we'd have? & i hate her
& her pink-gray face her still-brown neck she hasn't
bothered to bleach to match i hate her armful
of clattering bangles the way she touches my mother's
arm & pretends to be her friend the way she wrinkles
her nose whenever she enters our apartment her own
apartment large & expensive but filled with awful gaudy
objects i giggle a little to myself at the memory of haitham

saying to her straight-faced
aunt amal, would you agree that money can't buy
taste? though my laugh dies as i hear her continue
to mama *remember the girl you wanted to name*
yasmeen? with yellow ribbons braided into her hair
such a pretty name i never understood
why you chose the other

& in the mirror i try to unknot the hair tangled at my neck
& of course there's no point i give up & stare
into my blurring reflection my body filled
with strange static & see only a smudge where my nose
& mouth should be only the eyes
large & blinking & intact & when i blink again it's back
the same unremarkable face

Mama

of course i know my mother is lonely
her days & nights spent mostly in the company
of ghosts so much of who & what she's loved
she speaks of only in past tense though mostly
she keeps quiet i can't help but imagine
that her life was enormous before we came here
loud & crowded & lively as any party
& then the final notes of the song & everyone
is gone except me & i feel my own smallness
as i try to fill her life's empty spaces
though they gape around me like the one pair
of her high-heeled shoes i used to love
to play with when i was little so much of our life
feels like sitting at a table set for dozens
who will never again arrive the two of us surrounded
by empty chairs my mother is lonely
& i am her daughter her only i think that might be why
i'm lonely too

The Photographs

the photographs are how i piece together
my imagining of my mother's first life
when she was aisha life of the party
a girl in a yellow dress who was going
to be a dancer loved & laughing
& never lonely a whole life stretched
before her in the company of friends
& family & the man she chose
who chooses her & knows all
her favorite songs who watches her
with awe & never dies his life
braided tightly to the long bright ribbon of hers

i don't think she even knows i have them
these pictures i've had them for years
in the box i keep under my bed
& she's never noticed because she never
asks for them because she hasn't looked
at them in years

Mama

when i was little i always tried to make her smile

it’s why i learned the songs why i learned all

their words why i learned to love them

the smiles were always rare though lately they feel

even rarer & in their absence i keep myself company

with the songs she taught me to love the dream

of a lost world where she was happiest

i miss him too my father though we never met

i miss the country that i’ve never seen the cousins

& aunts & grandparents i miss the help

they could have offered the secrets they knew

that i never learned of how to keep her smiling

Overheard

it’s saturday & i wake messily sweating & crumpled
& somehow sure that it’s closer to afternoon than morning

through my closed door i can hear mama & khaltu hala
their easy chatter a low hum the clinking of sugar

being stirred into coffee something meaty & unfamiliar
wafting its smells from the stove when i move to investigate

i hear a shriek & rush to open the door see my mother
doubled over in her seat her shoulders shaking

& for a sinking sickening moment i’m sure she’s crying
i turn to look at khaltu hala to find out what happened

but she’s smiling shaking her head as mama rises
face shining with the tears i’d suspected

but she’s laughing

trying & failing to catch her breath before another peal escapes
khaltu hala catches my eye motions to the kitchen

i made turkey chili *go make yourself a plate* i point my chin
quizzically at mama my eyes on khaltu hala for an answer

& she chuckles *your mother is making fun of my fine*

american cooking *she keeps calling the chili* دمعة خواجات

white people curry & another peal rings out from mama
alongside khaltu hala’s hoot of laughter

my own fit of giggles joining them

Another Life

in the dream i am back home & i am beautiful my country
wrapped like an embrace around me my god not hated
my language washed of all its hesitation my father
alive alive he never gets into the car that night
(my mother will not talk about it except to say
there was a car an accident) in the dream
he never gets into the car stays home instead reading
poems aloud to my mother rubbing almond oil into
her already-soft feet sitting for hours on the front steps
of their house pointing to the moon’s perfect reflection
in the river below in the dream he stays alive stays
alive alive stays alive to meet me

Baba

i think if he'd lived my father would have been
a famous singer crooning & preening in a shiny suit
his hair dense & dark or maybe an artist
throwing clay onto a potter's wheel & shaping creatures
from its mass like some sort of smaller god or maybe
an athlete muscle & vein cording in his still-strong legs
a scientist serious in goggles & white a writer pulling
stacks of books from his knotted brain a television star
his face so familiar he's almost everyone's father but
always mostly mine coming home in the evenings
to swing me up onto his back & run circles until i'm dizzy
holding my hand in his callused grasp teaching me
the songs he loved the songs he danced to
with my mother unwidowed & smiling with all
her teeth twirled in the living room
dress billowing over her calves loved both of us
belonging to someone tied together by the belonging
by my father my father no longer gone

Haitham

tonight haitham does the funniest impression
of abdel halim hafez pitches his voice as deep
as it will go & croons all my favorite songs
on tape so beautiful that they make me want to cry
but when he does them i can't choke back the laugh
i join him in my own awful singing voice
نار يا حبيبي نار اه يا حبيبي بحبك

& his grandmother is so superstitious but also maybe
just irritated by our squawking voices drowning out
her television program tells us not to be so rowdy
at twilight because that is when the fine skin between
our world & the next is thinnest

don't run after sundown because the jinn will trip you
don't raise your voice or you will call them to our side
& i'm supposed to be too old to be scared by these things
but it works & when haitham opens his mouth
to sing again i suggest we watch a movie instead

Boys

simply put haitham has other friends
though outside of school back in our building
his time is mostly mine always home when i knock
always knocking when i'm home

but at school where we have no classes together
& different lunch periods i see him sometimes
in the hallway where he will always smile or wave
then return to startling laughter from the mouths
of his friends that tangle of big-shouldered boys
their smell of musk & salt crowded around haitham's
smaller frame though among them he seems not only
to fit in but taller their crown jewel
their beating heart

for a while he tried to invite me places with them
movies & parties & diners & the arcade & i've never
said yes always too shy & feeling increasingly
hot & confused by their boy-smell their big teeth & hands
the ways i sometimes want both to be looked at
& to disappear

i think always of the version of myself i'd want them to see
to look at in awe to never look away that better
& beautiful version of me that version named yasmeen
deserving of each & every pair of their eyes but as myself

i am mostly happy to wave back to haitham in the hallway
& sneak a glance at the backs of the other boys’ unturned heads

The Mirror

some nights when mama is working late
& haitham is with his other friends
i sit at mama's dresser its enormous mirror
stretched before me mama's rarely used jars
& powders darkening my lashes flushing
my cheeks carving cheekbones into the roundness
of my features a yellow dress from its hanger
wedged in the back of mama's closet its bright silk
from a forgotten time

& in the mirror i become another girl i become yasmeen
i practice smiling & laughing & imagine myself
talking to the boys i imagine that i am beautiful
i imagine someone is looking i play as if
for an audience i coach a twang into my voice
& twirl a lock of hair around my finger

tonight the hair catches in khaltu hala's ring
& i barely have enough time to untangle it
& slip mama's dress back into the closet
i hurry into the bathroom as she arrives

Videos

what i'll never share with anyone is my true
guilty pleasure every weekday after school
the hour or so before haitham comes knocking on my door
when my mother is still hours away from returning home
i'll push the coffee table off to the side & watch
american music videos try to shape my limbs & waist
to match their dancers their high-heeled singers
& imagine my body as one of theirs instead
& i always feel a little less lonely
loving these songs that everyone loves too

but tonight with the volume turned high
i do not hear my mother's key in the door
& she walks in to find me trying awkwardly
to keep pace with a dance missing the beat
& then catching it only to miss it once again
& when i turn to see her standing smiling
watching me the shame courses hot
through my now-frozen limbs & i am so
embarrassed i start to cry i scramble
for my room & will not emerge for dinner
avoid her eyes for days until i'm sure
she will not mention it

English

most of the other kids in my arabic class
learned english like haitham did by talking
to people speaking up in school going
to movies with classmates being invited
to sleepovers to parties

when haitham & i were younger we would mostly
speak to each other in arabic until one day
when he announced that if we were ever going
to lose our accents we would have to speak
english with each other though these days
we kind of have our own language
a perfect mix of the two so we never have
to translate & the words can come out
in whichever language we think them in

i didn’t learn the way he did by talking
to anyone else by making any other friends
i learned alone at home with the television
with the radio learning those songs too
not just the ones from back home i knew all
the ones from here too sang them softly
to myself in my room in the shower
training out my accent shaping my mouth
around the twang sparkling & new

English

standing at my locker i stuff books & papers
into my backpack to go home laughter & chatter
buzzing all around me i imagine myself
as its silent center a black hole in the universe

a big group of boys & girls are clattering together
down the hallway joking & squealing
as one of the boys reaches to tickle a girl
her giggles & shrieks piercing the entire hallway
before she breaks off into a run to escape
& he follows knocking into me & sending
my backpack flying loose papers & books
& pencils scattering everywhere

they both briefly look back & he calls out
sorry! & over the noise of the group returning
to its chatter i hear the girl say as i bend
to crush everything back into my bag *i don't think*
she speaks english

Halloween

haitham rides with me to school & today walks
with me to my locker joking about the costumes we pass
who's going to tell jason that dumb jock isn't a costume
do you think tara knows that costume is racist

& we pass a tall boy dressed like a ghost from one of those
old movies just a sheet with two eyeholes cut out
& i say to haitham thinking no one else will hear
how original & the boy behind the sheet turns
to me making sure his friends are within earshot
calls in his voice muffled by fabric

i'm dressed as your terrorist mom & everyone
howls with laughter another wraps a sweater
around his head like a turban *& i'm*
your terrorist dad & haitham steps in front
don't say that her father's dead but his small voice
drowns in all the chaos

i look down & watch my feet flicker in & out of their outline
my body humming with shame i am a ghost
from no movie anyone would care enough to make

the boys have already forgotten us
& moved farther down the hall
my eyes feel hot & i hate that i'm going to cry

Mama

when i was little i loved to wrap myself
in my mother's scarves what felt like
a thousand colors knotted into gowns
into headbands covering my sleeping body
on the couch halfway through a movie

what i loved most was to drape one
after another over my face breathe in
her smell of sandalwood & flowers & look out
into the world in its new colors the sky
made purple by the pink chiffon made green
by the yellow one the whole apartment
becoming a painting

after that day at the airport years ago
i thought she'd stop wearing it & once
asked her why she didn't & she lifted
for a moment from her crumpled sadness
into something harder *nima, i need you*
to understand that it was those men
who were wrong not us i will never
be ashamed of where i come from
i will never let you be ashamed
of who we are & what i didn't ask
is what made her so sure

Yasmeen

it’s twilight i’m home alone & singing
along to my cassettes in my loudest voice
& already feeling a little better
twirling about like in the old movies
where everyone sings & somehow
knows all the words نار يا حبيبي نار

& maybe i’m too old to be afraid
of being left in the apartment by myself
but i keep thinking i see movement in the corner
of my eye snap my head around to find nothing

& to prove to myself that i am brave i close
my eyes throw my head back & sing
even louder اه يا حبيبي بحبك
& when i open my eyes she is standing
in the corner of the room

& she looks like me but overall somehow better
longer in the spine hair smooth & nails unbitten
& so solid i know she’s there but with something
blurred around her edges & when she opens
her mouth she speaks in my voice except
she speaks in perfect arabic & her very first word
is my name

nima graceful one don't you wonder
don't you wonder
don't you & the air behind her shimmers
like interrupted water figures swimming through it
like fish my father's face muscled & moving
a skyline two rivers & a date palm
a doum tree an old woman in a yellow tobe
her face just like my mother's & yet another me
holding court to a cluster of cinnamon-colored girls
our arms around each other's waists & all of it could be
real enough to touch if i wasn't too scared to move

i retreat into my head & remember mama fatheya's
warnings about the spirit world at twilight stories
of children trapped on the other side but the girl
before me can't be a jinni she's me maybe she's
my sister a twin i never knew a secret she's real
enough to touch & doesn't seem at all evil
but i'm scared & she's so blurred around the edges
like a reflection in water my mother would not like this
& would tell me to recite my prayers to protect myself
from jinn protect myself from their temptations
i'm not sure this is what she meant but just in case
i look squarely at the girl who i know now is yasmeen
my other me & tell her to leave me alone

Yasmeen

my mother is watching television one of those
egyptian soap operas crowded with big-bodied

fast-talking light-skinned women wailing
& slapping their cheeks i can't follow the story & feel

how clumsy my arabic is i start & falter & start again
mama & she is too absorbed in the program to hear me

mama, something happened she lowers
the volume & turns to me & looks so tired

i think it might be wrong to burden her & what even
do i have to say *why did you name me nima?*

speak arabic *why did you give me this name?*
what happened? her attention is slipping away

& a mustached character on the television just slapped
another character who i think is supposed to be his brother

mama silence *mama* *what is it?* an edge
of irritation in her voice & i know i cannot tell her

about last night & make it make sense but she is looking
at me now a single worry line in her perfect face

& all i want is her protection her attention i want her to pull me in & tell me not to be afraid to stroke my head

& murmur a prayer into the part in my hair i don't know how to make her believe me about the girl i saw

yasmeen i don't know that i believe it myself *what is it, habiba?* & i know

i can't tell her so instead i say *a boy at school called me a terrorist*

& the ready tear in her eye starts to fall

Haitham

meets me at the park & climbs onto the swing
next to mine already telling some story some
joke *haitham* he doesn't hear me *haitham*
what? & i don't know what to say first to tell him
about yasmeen or that i'm mad at him for telling
those boys about my dad but all i can muster is
do you believe in jinn? what?
you know, all those stories your grandmother tells
she just makes those up to scare us
but what if they're true?

he raises an eyebrow & breaks into a grin *you know,*
nima, you're lucky i'm the only one who knows
how weird you are which would normally make me laugh
but today it cuts today it sounds like *you don't have*
any other friends i am full of hurt full of anger
& i just need somewhere to put it i am so sick of carrying
it around so i let myself give in
i let it take over my voice i let it take over my entire
body *how could you just tell everyone about*
my dad like that? it's so easy for you to tell my business,
but where's your dad? why don't you tell that story instead?
or actually i feel intoxicated possessed i lick my lips
& continue *why don't you just leave me alone?*
you know the only reason we're even friends is because
you live down the hall we're not even in the same grade

anymore *why don’t you go bother*
some other ninth grader & i storm away the swings
creaking on their chains behind me

Bathwater

later in the bathtub i replay it all behind my eyes
embarrassed by my overreaction missing haitham
already too frozen by shame to apologize

i look down at my hands warping underwater he's right
there's something weird about me my body filled
with an unfamiliar current my hands flitting in
& out of focus even when i blink & look again
i lift the left one out of the bathwater to study in the light
translucent as my mother's best chiffon i try to touch
the bathtub & both hands pass through the ceramic
& my body goes hot again this time with fear
my hands flicker a final time
then go solid i give them one last shake
& scramble slippery out of the bath

Haitham

i see him at school & he will not look at me
i keep checking my hands sure that i have
once again gone invisible but they’re there

every day he’s surrounded by others
making jokes & laughing his enormous laugh & i won’t
be the first to apologize the shame still warm
in my stomach but without him i sometimes go days
without speaking out loud
my mother at work & then tired
my cassettes wounding me with their familiar songs

i go home & climb into bed before it gets dark
& still feel heavy & tired in the morning
today i fall asleep again in math & when i wake
i can see the desk
through the hum of my translucent arm

Advice

my head is in my mother's lap her cool hands
on my cheek & in my hair & for a long time
she's quiet unbothered by the tears & snot
soaking into her skirt

at your age she finally says *you shouldn't be spending*
so much time with boys why don't you talk to some
of the girls in your arabic class & she stops when i start
crying so hard my skull feels too tight for my brain

& we sit like this for what feels eternal she sighs
& smooths my hair *i see you two together & it doesn't*
seem right for you to be apart i'm sure he misses
you too why don't you try giving him a call

Calling Haitham

his grandmother answers the phone & though it's late
she tells me haitham isn't home she sounds surprised
he told me he was with you i feel a little prickle
of guilt knowing he's going to be in trouble
& it seems rude just hanging up the call without asking
after mama fatheya's health so i chew my thumbnail
while she lists the day's creaking & aches

i study my hands for another nail to bite & remember
them shimmering in the bathwater though today
they are solid & warm with blood & when she finally
pauses for breath i see my chance *mama fatheya,*
what do you know about jinn? are they real? are they bad?
do they really ever come to our side?

i hear her groan into her chair with a sigh
& wet her lips before she begins
of course they're real there are all sorts of creatures
you know nearly human & just outside our line of sight
they've never given me any trouble though of course
i use the stories to get you children to behave
my husband (god rest his soul) couldn't see them & just
thought the house was haunted they rarely
linger & on this side they don't look fully there

& of course you must have heard there was

a nasty rumor for some time right after you were
born that there were two of you in the womb
the other girl never born one child for each parent
one child for each world i hear her bite wetly
into something & chew while she thinks *anyway*
why do you ask

Jinn

maybe yasmeen was sent to bring me home
to my father his other daughter
my other me maybe i am fading from this world
to grow solid on the other side

Boys

i pass haitham & his friends in the hall
& without his usual wave & smile he becomes
another brick in the impenetrable wall of boys
who don’t see me

again today they laugh & run & shove
their way down the hallway & again
as i stand at my locker my open backpack
is knocked over by one of their games
this time two of haitham’s friends this time
no one apologizes i look up from
my scattered books to find haitham
walking away with them
haitham impossibly far away
haitham who will not turn to look at me

Arabic Class

haitham still sits behind me in arabic class on sunday
though when i arrive he is already showing something
in his notebook to a girl sitting next to him
& they laugh together & do not stop
or look up as i take my seat

as the teacher drones on i study each face around
the classroom the popular ones i secretly think of
as the americans spotless high-top sneakers
the girls in zigzagged braids & tight t-shirts the boys
with the slightly swollen piercing in their left ears
where they'd been forced to remove the earring
before coming to class

the girl talking to haitham is wearing jeans that look
brand-new the baby hairs at her hairline slicked
down with a toothbrush & through her eyes
i try to see his scrawniness his used-up clothes
& instead find only the face carved from marble
geometry of the cheekbones little gap in his teeth
as he laughs his way through another joke
new broadness of his shoulders
that makes him look despite his short stature
like he takes up all the space in the room

i remember when we first started coming here

when i’d just started growing & all my clothes
were too small overhearing some girl whisper
to another that i wore such tight jeans
because i didn’t have a father & before
i could even think to cry haitham leaning up
from his seat behind me to ponder loudly
that if both her parents had let her out of the house
with that ugly t-shirt on then i was honestly
better off with just the one i remember
being warmed by the ring of my own laugh
& feel myself sitting alone now haunted
by that old & forgotten sound

The Headscarf

i know something happened on the news again
because my mother has stopped wearing her scarf
to work & instead tucks each strand of her hair
into a knit hat the nape of her neck new
& tender in the light she who once said
i will never be ashamed of where i come from
i will never let you be ashamed of who we are
seems to have changed her mind & i wonder
if this means i should feel ashamed too

i float through another day at school
sleeping & flickering & talking to no one
so many times each day i look down to see
my arms legs stomach gone translucent
& each time i think with something almost
like relief that i will finally disappear my body
returns & i think i've made the whole thing up

at day's end i clang my locker shut
& four boys large enough to block out the light
are closing in around me

one pulls the neck of his t-shirt up around his face
a clumsy hijab two others hoot with laughter
& follow suit & for a moment i think they might
forget me laughing together & enjoying their joke

a strip of pale midriff showing on each torso
one of them is silent then cuts in *my dad's a pilot*
his voice wet with poison *he could have been*
on that plane i think he might cry & the sound
he chokes out makes the hair on the back of my neck
prickle up he turns & shoves me
& i feel the cold metal of the lockers against my back
terrorist bitch he spits into my hair

i raise my arms to cover my face i cower & still
they move in closer my blood feels hot
& swirls messily through my body
i press my eyes shut & will myself to vanish
but when they open i am still there
dampening with sweat i cry out for yasmeen
& they hesitate when nothing happens the boy's hand
clamps onto my shoulder & wrenches me to the ground
i hear my heartbeat roaring in my ears

he snarls in pain i look up
& i am outside the circle standing upright & opaque
blood packed underneath my nails

The Office

i didn’t get to wash my hands & that’s proof enough
that i started it he’s bleeding & i am not

though given their number & how they tower over me
the principal decides it wasn’t one-sided

& therefore it’s only fair to suspend all five of us
& sends us out while he calls our homes one by one

Outside the Office

my mother is at work & i'm not allowed to leave
until someone comes for me my nails are bitten
to the quick & sting i can't scrape out
the dark lines of blood

one by one the other mothers file in painted
& hairsprayed & perfumed clicking in their heeled
shoes & bustling into the principal's office
without looking at me not even bothering
to shut the door

their indignation rings out into the hall
no way would my son varsity honor roll
his permanent record my son my son
an emotional time you know, of course,
that his father's a pilot? says she screamed at them
in her language menacing so of course, you understand
you understand thank you exactly
i knew you'd understand & he walks them out
to their cars where they shake hands all smiling

Why Here

around sunset mama fatheya comes to get me
i tell the office she is my grandmother
& does not speak any english they look into
her wizened face & find its matching brown
in mine & let her take me home

my shirt is torn & when she asks all i'll say
is that i fought another girl i tell her my mother
will be home soon thank her & let myself
into the apartment where i sit for hours
on our noisy couch still covered in its plastic

i am too tired to move to wash or change
my ripped clothes or scrub my fingernails
with a brush until the blood is my own

dusk falls & night falls further my mother's key
clicks into the door & she walks in to find me
silent in the dark shirt torn & something
breaking behind my eyes & before she can ask
i am frothing with anger at everything at her

the name tag crooked on her ill-fitting blouse
the hat slipping from her face & showing strands
of her still-dark hair her sad too-blue jeans
my only family my only person & it all

feels like her fault *why did you bring us here?*
they hate us silence she does not tell me
to speak arabic *why did you bring me here*
to be tortured to be alone why would you
do that to me? she opens her mouth to speak
& nothing comes out my anger grows a second
head & makes me cruel *i wish baba was here*
instead of you i wish someone was here who
could protect me & i will not stay to see her cry
so i shuffle into the bathroom
to run the water to scalding

Ghosts

after i’ve sat in the bath until the water
gets cold i climb out & dry off
walk out to see my mother sitting
dejected on the couch her face
in her tired hands

before i can slink off to my room
i hear her voice a new sharpness
nima come here tell me
what happened & for a moment
i think of telling her everything
instead of carrying it all around
myself i think of laying my head
in her lap & asking her to help
to carry some of it with me

but at the sight of her head covered
in that sad knit hat i know
i will not give her anything more
to carry i can’t so all i say
is that i fought another girl
at school & i am almost relieved
by her anger the way it hardens
her soft & hurt places *i don’t even*
know who you are anymore
where is my daughter where

has she gone

& when she says this
i swear for a moment i see yasmeen
flickering in the corner of the room
but i ignore her to instead turn
to my mother & snarl *& where*
is my mom i feel sometimes
like i got two ghost parents
before turning to slam the door
to my room

The Silence

i’m suspended from school for a week
my mother leaves for work in the morning
& i hear her come quietly home at dark
i have not spoken or heard her speak
since i raised my voice that night

i spend hours imagining myself
as the other girl yasmeen not only the spirit-girl
who came to see me but the one i built for years
myself perfect in all the ways i am flawed
beautiful bright & humming & full up
with laughter beloved & blooming somewhere
kinder where her language is her own
& unhunted no one tells her to go back
where she came from because she is home
& known & never disappears into the bathwater
isn’t washed out by tears & maybe i’m
all wrong not because i’ve come to the wrong
country maybe any country on this side
of the membrane between worlds isn’t mine

& as if to confirm my body starts its new & strange hum
as both my legs go abstract as static my hips & stomach
& chest flicker in & out of color my arms
i shift my weight & the plastic couch covering does not make
a single noise remains silent as if completely

untouched i check for a reflection in the dark surface
of the dormant television & only the slightest outline
of a girl looks back i call out my voice hoarse
from disuse *i'm ready now* & wait for the jinn
to come fetch me to shepherd me to the other side

i close my eyes & call again heart beating in my throat
a moment passes then another & i open
to see my whole body restored solid & human
& crackling the plastic on the couch

Alone

i thought haitham would call & he hasn’t
i imagine him bright & laughing with his
real friends & my loneliness grows teeth
i feel them chewing at my stomach

i miss my mother i hear her moving
through the apartment making only
the faintest sounds thin stream of
running water hushed sear of an egg
frying in butter her soft step leaving
in the mornings returning at dusk
murmuring to khaltu hala on the phone
& i ache imagining haitham somewhere
in the apartment on the other end of the line

not a day passes without a plate
left on the counter when i emerge
from my room into the afternoon light
never a note or a knock but always
without fail a plate & warm pita bread
in its basket covered with a dishcloth
cut fruit in the refrigerator curved slices
of pear sometimes apple today an orange
cold & thrilling & tart

i miss her voice naming me her small

& cool hands her unlined girl-face
her rare & lilting laugh i miss her younger
before i knew her dancing in the photo
boundless & open & full of dreaming
dressed in color jasmine blooms falling
from her neighborhood tree to rest
beneath her feet i mourn that girl & i miss
my mother the only person i belong to
the one who chose me by choosing my name

Mama

i'm sorry i blamed you i'm sorry
i yelled i'm sorry you got this storm cloud
for a daughter instead of the flowers
you deserved i'm sorry our life
is so small i'm sorry you didn't get
to be young that you got me instead
i'm sorry you're alone i'm sorry i'm
the only family you got to keep i'm sorry
you lost your country & got one that doesn't
want us i'm sorry you work all day & still
don't have anything for yourself i'm sorry
on the days you wear the hat instead of
the scarf & scared on the days you don't
i'm sorry you didn't get the daughter
you dreamt up the girl named for
her sweetness & blooming i'm sorry
you got me instead & were left all alone
to raise me i'm sorry my arabic
isn't better i'm sorry for being so
american in here & not enough of one
out there i'm sorry i blamed your scarf
when they called me a terrorist i'm sorry
i blamed your loss for the ways my life
feels empty i'm sorry for not making
you laugh enough for never trying anymore

to make you smile i'm sorry
you're lonely i am too i'm sorry
i'm not better company i'm sorry
that i'm so gloomy that i'm not
beautiful like you i'm sorry for reminding you
of my father for reminding you of what you lost
i'm sorry you made this life
for me instead of the bright & bountiful one
you could have tried to make for only
yourself i'm sorry i embarrass you
i'm sorry i don't have anything to show you
that it was all worth it i'm sorry
i shouted at you i'll say
when my mother gets home

Yasmeen

i’ve been in the bathtub so long i worry
something might take root
my fading fingers are graying & wrinkled
from the water i chant my apology
to my mother out loud until i feel it
memorized then hold my breath & slide
my body down the tub until my head
is underwater & in the silence i decide
yasmeen is the daughter my mother
deserves bright spot in her weary day
sprig of jasmine in her small life
something to be proud of at last

i sit up in the tub & call her in every
way i can first by name shouting it
then chanting then with a plea & still
she is not here i remember the night
she appeared the cassette & my closed
eyes mama fatheya’s warnings *don’t*
raise your voice or you will call them to
our side & i sing mouth open &
eyes shut i gather all the lyrics i remember
& try to lure her again نار يا حبيبي نار
اه يا حبيبي بحبك

& when i’ve exhausted all the words i know

to all the songs i open my eyes
& still she will not answer me

Haitham

my mother comes home & settles heavily
onto the couch tired face in her hands

i sit next to her & begin but it comes out
all wrong out of order *i'm sorry you got*

me as a daughter instead of the one you deserve
i'm sorry i'm me & not yasmeen i'm sorry

& the telephone won't stop ringing i falter
before i can finish & before she says anything

she crosses to answer the call *yes*
hi, khalti fatheya what is it what happened

a silence then another my mother
clamping her hand to her mouth

her eyes filling still silent *yes we're coming*
we're coming now & she fits the phone back

into its cradle *get your jacket what happened*
you have to get your jacket where are we going

she will not answer & after she locks the door behind us
my mother cradles my face with her cold hands

we are going to the hospital it's haitham

The Bus

the bus clatters down the crowded street filled as always
to the brim with people all of us in shades of brown
of sepia & the smell packs tight around us bodies
worked too hard & gone sour

i am standing with my silent mother my distracted mother
swaying beside me & whispering a softest prayer under
her breath her eyes distant & downcast i miss her

& reach finally out to hold her hand right then the bus
hits a bump in the pockmarked road my mother's hand
pulls impossibly far away from mine to grab the rail above
& i shove my fist deep into my pocket
shame hot against my throat

PART 2

OLD COUNTRY

Haitham

seems so small crowded by machines
keeping him alive i've never seen him
so still so emptied of laughter a rip
in his right cheek the length of a finger
sewn up in dark stitches bandages winding
his forehead tube inserted in the corner
of his cracked mouth

mama fatheya has not greeted us has not
moved from her station at his bedside leaning
heavily on her walking stick with one hand
prayer beads cabling through the other
while she recites a stream of indiscernible
language i let my eyes blur & can
see it pouring from her mouth like smoke
& absorbing into his body

behind me his mother is sobbing to mine
my fault i sent him to the bigala after dark
i should have kept him home it isn't safe
not for any of us he's only a little boy
& the story unfurls a group of fully grown
men circling him in the parking lot taking
turns with their boots with a bat until
the shopkeeper hearing the commotion
comes out with his shotgun & scatters them

squats over haitham’s broken body groceries
smashed & scattered on the asphalt

& while he gathers up the boy a brick
then another goes crashing through the windows
of his store & he tells haitham’s stricken mother
i don’t understand between blows they were calling
him mohammed

& i’m choking on the story on the smells on
the drone of prayers streaming from mama fatheya’s
unmoving mouth i can’t bear to be in this building
full of dying & push my way out of the room
my mother calling out behind me

Hala

the hospital is a maze every room its own private
chamber of grief i wander numbly through the stark halls
& as much as it hurts to see haitham like this when he is
usually a clatter of movement always a flurry of laughter
& talking & motioning with his hands his face's hundred
cartoonish expressions to see him motionless
the brokenness of his face
it hurts more to be away the superstition
as always arrives to convince me he cannot die
as long as i'm in the room & i turn back to find him

outside the door my mother is sitting with khaltu hala
whose sobs have stilled her eyes are haunted staring into
some invisible point in space the words pouring
from her mouth *he's all i have he's the only thing*
in this world that's mine it should have been me i'd give
anything for it to have been me instead i brought him here
so we could have a different kind of life & even here i couldn't
keep him safe so what was all of it for? everything i lost
it was all so i could give him a different life what if i lose
him too? & here her face crumples her whole body
collapses into grief my mother gathers her in her arms
& rocks her like a baby & i wait for her to make
the empty comforting promise to say *he'll be okay*
to say *he'll wake up* i want to hear it too
but she will not lie to her sobbing friend instead she repeats

until it is almost a chant *i know* *i know* *i know*

Touched

it’s the last morning of my suspension & we are crowded
into the bus my mother & i

pointed back toward the hospital

her face is far away troubled we have not eaten
since the night before & i mean to leave her be

but i can’t hold all this myself *mama* silence
mama what is it? what will i do if he dies?

the bus jolts to a stop & a stranger a man is pushed
up against my mother her face changes & she snarls

don’t touch me don’t you dare touch me & turns away
ignoring his flustered apology she is silent a long time

then speaks without looking at me her eyes in some
faraway place that hurts her *there were officers*

they stopped us in our car & wanted to touch me
there were so many of them teeth shining in the dark

banging on the car windows with their guns your father
he would not unlock the doors

& here her eyes empty entirely

when he tried to drive us away they shot him
her eyes are large & tearless hands clutching her coat

against her shrunken body i cannot stand to hear the rest
of the story my eyes are hot & my whole body is ringing

& i can't stand to be so near her open hurting pushed into
her perfumed side by the crowd

so i shove my way through
the sour crush of bodies & off the bus

my mother's hoarse cry
my name ripping through the air
sealed in by the closing doors

Running

my mother is screaming something i cannot hear
i hesitate & look to her through the window of
the moving bus then turn & run down a block
crowded with pedestrians ducking & turning
& crossing busy streets i run until my lungs
are searing my heart hammering & swollen
i look up & find myself in an unfamiliar part
of the city & feel faint for want of water

just ahead a cluster of tents & clamoring
& music smells of charring meat & clapping
& laughter & bells for a moment i want
to go back to my mother to apologize
to sit with her by haitham's bed & hold his hand

but my hunger heaves my tired body
toward the smell into the festival
wetting my chapped mouth

Street Fair

i wander through the maze of color & smell
a parade running like a vein through the middle
& all around i see booths draped in what looks
like every flag i think for a second to look
for mine & of course it is not there mine
not a culture exciting enough for a booth for a fair
only ever mentioned in a list of warnings on the news

at a stall draped in the same red white black green
as our flag i ask for food for water the seller
names a price i feel for my wallet & remember it
with a jolt sitting untouched on the kitchen counter
& my armpits go damp with fear in the autumn chill

i turn away & am pulled as if by water
into the current of dancers musicians horses
& the metallic trill of tambourines throbbing of drums
& i cannot see anything but the bright rustle of skirts
of belled ankles arms twisting up & heads
thrown back the crowd pressing in closer
& pulling me along my feet sometimes
not touching the ground

Houses

the parade releases me right as my lungs begin
to seize for air i gasp & stumble into a quiet street
bent over & coughing pulling the late autumn's
clean cold into my throat in ragged gulps the minutes
pass & i heave myself upright & take in the block ahead
gilded with bright foliage scattering golden leaves
into the street & onto the row of long staircases
leading up to each high house each railing molded
in intricate patterns grapevines long-haired sirens
tiny metal flowers the light in each window warm
& thrumming with the satisfied lives inside

Trespassing

halfway down the block i hear the squeak
of an unlatched gate swaying in the stirring
breeze the leaves swirling upward in circles
from the pavement the windows of the house
above darkened & quiet

i have to keep moving to outrun this day
this week the sight of haitham's split mouth
taped to its tube i push through the gate
& hear my heart pounding in my ears
muffling everything else i pause & my mother's
animal cry *don't touch me* *they shot him*
rips back into my thoughts another step forward
& it disappears the fleeting thought *he's dead*
because of her drowned by a warm wash of guilt
another step & it goes silent i move unseeing this way
until i have turned from the side of the house
to its backyard & see the enormous swimming pool
stretched across its water warm & wafting steam
in little curls into the air

The Water

before i can talk myself out of what is definitely
a stupid idea i've undressed & lowered myself
into the water searching for something like
the echoing peace of the bathtub at home the pool
is colder than it looks & smells sharply of chlorine
i am not a good swimmer but i can keep myself
generally afloat & paddle a slow lap around the edge
then another another & finally sucking in
a mouthful of air i submerge my head
& force my eyes open against the sting

i blow a thick stream of bubbles into the blue quiet
& kick myself forward barely moving before
i have to come up again for air the world so loud
& violent in its color after the dark silence of the water
another intake of breath & i plunge again into
the quiet propel myself forward with my clumsy
kicks my graceless arms finding a strange music
in the water's weight stretching forward then arcing
to my sides every movement a victory
of my inelegant body & the simple motion
soothes me the guarantee that if i only kick
my legs & pull with my arms my body will
drive forward every moment i raise my head
for air feels like an interruption i swim this way
until my limbs feel emptied of their bones

Caught

so tired i feel a little loosened
from my body i crumple by the edge
of the pool & shiver blotting myself
dry with the thick fleece of my sweatshirt
i pile my clothes back on my soaked hair
dripping a steady stream down the nape
of my neck the first actual fun i've managed
since fighting with haitham though even
thinking his name calls back the ache
& the tears grow hot in my chlorine-stung eyes
i stretch onto my back by the pool's edge feeling
thoroughly sorry for myself falling again into wishing
for another self another life until the distant
squeak of the gate opening stills my whole
humming body into listening waiting to be caught

an older man hair graying around his ears
strides into the yard a tiny limp dragging
his left foot a beat behind the other & there is
no way he has not seen me he stops just short
of the pool's edge & bends at the waist
peering into the shimmering water for anything
inside i wince at his right foot stepping
heavily on the ends of my drenched hair

& look guiltily up into his face his gray eyes
sliding unfocused across then past
my splayed body he shrugs blows into
his thick hands for warmth & makes his way
slowly back into the house i sit up & glance
down at my body & my body is not there

The Diner

i pull myself up from the tiled edge of the pool
& hurry out into the hushed street i watch myself
flicker in & out before finally going solid i think
i have maybe just saved my own life by being
unnoticeable i want to figure out what
makes me disappear what brings me back

i comb through my memories of disappearing
in the bathtub at school now at the edge
of a stranger's swimming pool each time i'd been feeling
that i didn't want to be myself wishing for a different life
& the thought clicks loudly into place i can disappear
by dwelling on the wish that i was not here
that yasmeen had been born instead

by now my hunger is a sharp pang heightened
by swimming & running my eyes go in & out of focus
& when they blur over i see new movement
figures disappearing when i blink & look again
strange birds delicate & barely formed
twisting translucent through the air
solemn cats assembling silently up each staircase
covered in a layer of mist
another blink & they've cleared away all except
the slightest outline of a girl gliding halfway up
the block away from me yasmeen she's come

back i hurry along behind her resisting
the urge to call out in case she flickers away
& leaves me behind she turns into another quiet street
& melts into the closed door of a small diner i push
the door open & follow & in the clatter of dishes
& talk i know she’s left me again i have no money
& no plan & am governed now only by my hunger
so i tremble into a vinyl booth & ask the cheerful
lipsticked waitress for a cheeseburger fries
a strawberry milkshake mozzarella sticks a slice
of apple pie i down my first glass of water
in two gulps & ask for another & when the food arrives
crowded onto my small table i eat steadily without
coming up for air until i am so full i feel a little sick

The Stranger

now that i've eaten & can think clearly i understand
how much trouble i am about to get into i maybe
could have wheedled a free plate of fries some water
from the kind waitress with my sad story
& empty pockets but how to ask for an entire feast
after i've already eaten it

to buy myself some time i ask for the menu again
pretend to study it while she clears my round
of greasy plates
my heart is knocking loudly around my body & any
minute now i am going to cry i close my eyes
& before i can open them a man's voice
so close he must be at my table asks me if i am all right

my eyes spring open & he is sitting across from me
his eyes are large & pouched sad but not unkind
their sharp blue not unlike pool water stark in their
dim & bloodshot whites he's the age i imagine
my father to be though his gray-brown mustache
is wispy & his beard missing in patches like
the new growths of the boys at my school but his
suit looks expensive his fingernails short & clean
& polished & when the waitress approaches

he hands her two bills from a roll he produces & bares
his gray teeth in a smile that does not quite reach his eyes
that will be all for my niece & just a coffee for me cream
& three sugars thanks she leaves
& he turns the gray smile to me asks again
if i'm okay & do i need help getting home

i close my eyes again mama's voice my whole life
never go anywhere alone with a man not even
the next room not even an uncle or cousin not even
& in a prickle of tears i realize why & swat her voice
from my head before the first drop falls i am so tired
i just want to go home i just want
i am so full of wanting so much of it for what i cannot
change again haitham's broken face
again my mother's shriek *they shot him* i am so tired
of everything happening to me at once he seems
nice enough & i want so badly
to go home i open my eyes & nod

The Stranger

i fumble with my seat belt while the engine wheezes
awake i've given him my address i'm so tired
& just want to go home his car is too hot
& smells like old meat something sweetly rotting
i peel off my thick sweatshirt & fold it into my lap

he has not spoken & my skin prickles with his looking

at a red light he turns to me his teeth glinting wetly
in a smile & murmurs so quietly i can barely hear him
you have a beautiful neck & turns back to face
ahead when the light changes i feel
knotted & embarrassed by the compliment
& put my sweatshirt back on

the neighborhoods crawl past the windows of the car
not one of them mine or anything i recognize
after another turn the highway stretches endless before us
the sun setting in a riot of color & fire

i do not want to make him upset but i know now
that this is not the way home i wet my chapped lips
& squeak out a pitiful *excuse me* & he does not turn
i clear my throat & try it louder when he faces me
i speak very slowly to keep the tremble in my voice
at bay *excuse me, hi, if you'd like i can try & give you*
directions? i don't think this is, i mean, i'm not
sure but i don't think this is the right way? & he smiles
kindly & says gently *oh, of course, no, i know,*
it's just that you live a few towns over & before i can finish
exhaling in relief he continues *so i thought we'd check into*
a hotel & do the rest of the trip in the morning
& i feel like i've swallowed my own sinking heart

The Driveway

he steers the car into the circular driveway of a hotel
hands his keys to a young man dressed in dark blue velvet
& motions me in through the revolving door tells me
to hang back while he handles the room
& when he's gone i look frantically around for help
but everywhere i look i see men & more men & i cannot
risk one worse than the one that brought me

i feel a hand on my arm my body already on high alert
as i turn ready to use my teeth my nails the hand
is not quite solid not quite warm humming
beneath the surface with something i can't name
& before i can speak she begins
& the voice in her mouth is like mine the hand
on my arm exactly like mine *you have to go now*
get on that bus & all my questions root me
to the spot her eyes are large & urgent
are my eyes yasmeen more solid than i've ever
seen her motions again frantically & when i still
do not move she turns hurries down
the driveway & climbs into a small bus marked
AIRPORT SHUTTLE & in an instant i am unfrozen
adrenaline coursing through my shaking limbs as i move
to follow her i slip quietly
back out through the revolving door hurry toward the bus
the driver smoking a cigarette on one side does not

see me climb in through the open door on the other
& inside yasmeen has disappeared once more

i crawl into the very last row & cower as the shuttle
fills in sparsely with passengers though no one
sits in the back or sees me crouched in the dark
my face pressed into the smell of leather blood roaring
in my ears she’s real & she saved me & i need her
to come back the driver finishes his cigarette
& climbs cheerfully on board
& the shuttle glides off into the night

The Airport

at the airport the crowd swirls busily around me
i barely avoid being flattened by a luggage cart
& an irritated woman asks me to *please move* her
please pronounced like a threat i scurry into
an empty corner to think & hear a familiar note
of arabic in the air then another i look up
& the counter in front of me is crowded with
my people carts piled high with taped-up
suitcases & overflowing shopping bags mothers
draped in bright fabrics clamping rowdy children
to their sides a small boy is wailing angry tears
spouting down his face while his father tries
to soothe him *you'll love it back home wait*
until you meet your cousins your grandparents
& see the river & eat the sweetest guava
you'll ever taste i'll teach you how to climb trees
how to swim you'll see you are going to be
so happy & with a pang i miss my mother

Broken Arabic

i spot a stooped woman mama fatheya's age
seated to the side in a wheelchair while her family
checks their bags i approach not realizing
i'm speaking in english until she shakes her head
& repeats in her gravelly voice *only arabic*

in my clumsy arabic i try to explain that i need
help getting home that i'm all alone & afraid
& don't know who can help me i stumble
through the sentences pausing to remember
each word & finally the only sentence i can assemble
is *i want to go home i want to go home*

where is your mother? she asks concerned
& through my tears i blubber wetly *at home*
are you here all alone? & i nod *& you don't*
have any way of getting home? & i shake my head
& in the mess i've made with my broken arabic
she calls to her daughter *this poor child*
wants to go home we have to help her & i don't
realize that i've mixed up the words & the word
for *home* i'd been using this whole time was *homeland*

No Daughter

the younger woman puts one hand on my shoulder
nails stained red-brown with henna
smooths my hair with her other palm
& asks *do you speak arabic?*
still flustered by the spreading chaos i've made
with my half language i shake my head no
she clicks her tongue in disapproval & turns to speak
to the older woman *look at her hair the dirty clothes*
i don't think this girl belongs to anyone no daughter of mine
no girl i named would ever be allowed out looking
like this she must not have a family at least not one
that she matters to & i feel shame like bile rising sour
in my throat she looks over to me & smiles
while continuing through gritted teeth to her mother
stupid child doesn't even speak arabic & all my rage
all my frustration my exhaustion my fear fill me
to bursting my arabic finds me & i hiss
up into her widening eyes *i have a mother*
i belong to someone i belong before i turn
on my heel & storm away & see yasmeen
again flickering in & out of the crowd
headed for the elevator

The Elevator

i ram a button to summon the service elevator
out of places to go so i'm following yasmeen
& i want to track her down
to ask her to help me again the metal doors
slide open & shut once i'm inside
& she is not there

& in the silver quiet i feel the exhaustion soak
my body & i feel homesick for the confines
of the apartment safe from this enormous world
& its horrors i want to go home i want
to find my way home the elevator has not moved
i want to go home i push the button to open the doors
deciding instead to find the stairs the doors part
in a surge of warm air outside the airport is gone

& in its place is the photograph of my parents
life-sized & real with smells & dry expansive heat
everything still frozen in its place my mother
laughing & dancing & in love my father his hand
mere moments from her waist so close i can see
the sweat beading his brow the mosquito
a second from his neck my father's dark hair
lush & dense & coiled flimsy cotton of his shirt soaked

in sweat little gap in his front teeth & the look
in his eyes dazed by his good luck

yasmeen steps into the frame & she looks fully
human solid & actually walking instead
of her usual supernatural glide from this close
we’re not so different she looks like me dressed
in costume with better grooming & better posture but still
me extends her hand & says *are you coming?*
& when i take it her hand is solid & warm a real
pulse full of real blood

The Photograph

we step into the party at the exact moment
my father’s hand meets my mother’s waist
& pulls her closer to him her laugh rings out
& soaks into the music the night black
as velvet but for the glow of fairy lights strung
across the trees the air smells green & floral
& in the distance the faintest smell of smoke

after a few songs i tear my eyes reluctantly
from my parents to take in the other guests
at a table playing cards i spot khaltu amal unbleached
& smiling her hair fastened in two skinny braids

& leaned up against a jasmine tree mostly hidden
by its branches is haitham’s mother khaltu hala
twisting a pearl ring around her index finger &
joking slyly with a man whose face is exactly
haitham’s & just beyond them on a makeshift
rickety stage the band pours its song into the night
the drummer my arabic teacher lanky
& with a full afro of hair restored tie loosened
around his neck on the keyboard is abbas
who drives the bus & leaned up against
the microphone crooning into it like a lover
barely recognizable in his joy is the man who runs
the bigala though here his face is unlined

& without its signature scowl they all look
so happy so young & full of what is possible

how could they ever have left why couldn’t i
have been born into this version of us have
grown up being sung to swung from arm
to loving arm by both my parents by their friends
everyone still alive shining in the heat back home

Home

at first i think i must be dreaming or making it
all up but i walk across the garden & feel the grass
crunching beneath my feet i put my hands
against a date palm & its trunk is warm & rough
to my touch & in front of me is a jasmine tree
its flowers blooming & perfume heady & sweet
& when i reach for one it comes away easily into my hand

i could spend hours just watching my parents dance
watching the muscles animating my father's living face
but i feel tugged toward the exit by my other longing
i slip through the clanging metal gate my lost country
just outside

Home

on the quiet street outside i mark the site
of the party by its muffled sounds then turn
a corner & find myself walking along the river
rippling in the darkness the aching notes
of the call to prayer echoing out
from a minaret nearby & before i can finish
catching my breath i feel a hand on my back
a waft of scent what might be sesame & a flower
whose name i never learned & i look up to see
yasmeen beside me my own awe reflected
in her widened eyes the eyes exactly mine my gratitude
makes me awkward & i do not look at her as i murmur
thank you for helping me & the hand is on my arm again
solid this time as she replies *of course*

& i don't know what else to say so we are silent for a while
before she speaks again *have you heard that saying*
"there but for the grace of god go i" & i shake my head
it's basically, like, that could have been me, you know?
& that's what i would have wanted someone to do for me so—
& as she says this i can't believe i haven't already asked
so i interrupt *wait, so, are you me?* & i know
it sounds stupid as i say it & i already feel
the warm spread of shame but she doesn't laugh
& she doesn't say no instead she bites her lip in thought
well, i'm yasmeen she begins

which, by the way, hi here a small smile *so, we're parallel versions of each other* *like, you're me if something different were to happen somewhere in the story* & it's like i've always imagined i know the answer before i even ask
but still i ask *in your version, is baba alive?* she nods
& mama fatheya's voice comes back to me clear
as a recording *one child for each world*
& i am tripping over myself with questions

enough that i don't register the hollowness of her answers
is he amazing? *yes* *is mama happy?* *all the time*
do you have a lot of friends? her face makes an expression
i can't name & for a moment she looks nothing like me *sure*
what are their names? what are they like? *just some girls from arabic class. they're nice* *& haitham?* & instead
of answering she turns the line of questioning on me
do you also collect cassettes? & i can't contain my excitement
oh my god, yes, you too? & she laughs in recognition
yes! what's your favorite? i love the sayed khalifa one
& immediately we are singing the line in unison
يا عقد اللولي لولي
يا بنت يا حلوة يا لولي

& for a moment all my questions are forgotten
my racing head quieted by this moment of kinship
i sit awhile in the feeling as yasmeen peers
into the river lost in some thought of her own until i ask
have you been here before? & she shakes her head
only in dreams & old pictures & she says it exactly like
i would have & even though she already knows
i turn to face her reach to shake her hand then decide

it would be weird so i pull my hand back & wave

you probably know this already but it feels weird not to say
hi, i'm nima she smiles & i watch my face in hers
my smile stretching into hers but the eyebrows
are less unruly & the hair is plaited neatly into a thick
untousled braid & i can't help but ask *how do you get*
your hair to do that? to stay put? & she smiles again
sesame oil & edge control as i will myself to remember
all of it this not-dream this country this other girl
together we stand at the riverbank & watch the moon
float over the water illuminating the city in ghostly colors

Haitham

we walk back into the thrum of the party
& i don’t know who i want to follow first
my parents still dancing & whispering
to one another bright center in the knot
of dancers but my attention is caught
once again by the man leaned up against
the tree with khaltu hala haitham’s
disappeared father living & gesturing wildly
with his hands as he talks in the exact manner
of haitham his wiry frame & big teeth

walking next to me as we approach them
yasmeen whispers *it’s amazing how he looks*
exactly like haitham & i don’t think
to ask how she knows haitham’s face
haitham’s name if he’s there in her version
of the story too shocked myself
by the resemblance the face i know
better than my own fastened onto
this one i’ve never seen haitham’s father
absent from any photograph haitham’s father
whose name he never says khaltu hala never says
mama fatheya never says & here he is
smelling of cinnamon & sweat running
his thumb across the ring on hala’s finger
until a voice calls out *ashraf! how are*

you, man? & he pulls his hand away
as if bitten steps a respectful distance
from khaltu hala & turns to greet his friend
while hala slinks off into the dancing crowd
shame twisting itself in her face

Ashraf

torn between following khaltu hala
back to my parents & haitham's
mystery father the story written
in their secrecy i give in to my curiosity
& inch closer to hear him chatting
with his friend *work's fine,*
you know, same old, never thought
i'd end up working for the government
but, you know & his friend cuts in
we understand you have mouths
to feed how are the kids? your wife?

& i work to unscramble these facts
in my knotted brain kids a wife
who it is clear now was not hala
& haitham never mentioned having siblings
never mentions his father at all
despite the life he spends wearing that man's
exact haunted face

Visitors

i walk dazed back into the knot of dancers
& just as i reach out to touch my mother's arm
yasmeen grabs my wrist *stop she can't*
see you we're only visitors, you understand?
we're not part of this part of time you'll only
scare her & i pull my hand back to my side

then why are we here? does this mean we can't stay?
& in her face i watch my features soften almost
as if with pity *i think we're just supposed*
to watch to learn something maybe fill in
some of the gaps we both have answer some
of the questions, you know? & something in my gut
is telling me there's more but i nod watching
khaltu hala approach my mother her jaw hardened
to keep the tears in yasmeen moves closer
to listen & i will too but first i steal an open
hungry stare into my father's living face before yasmeen
tugs on my hand & motions for us to follow
as my mother & khaltu hala
walk to a quiet corner of the party

aisha, i'm pregnant hala whispers
as understanding arranges itself first onto
my mother's face then panic *oh, hala oh no*

after finally submitting to an embrace hala turns
to go home refusing my mother's offer for company
i'm tired i'll call you in the morning
& leaves my mother to sit alone with the news
worry creasing her face
hands absently finding her stomach
i haven't told anyone yet, but so am i

Haitham

never talks about his father even when we were little
the contract was wordless & understood the contract
i broke & i am afraid i've broken everything along with it

i wonder how much he knows about this man whose face
he wears i wonder if he knows how alike their features are

their laugh their electric darting movements i wonder

if he ever feels unwanted if it hurts him to hear me
rhapsodize about my immortalized father while never asking
about his dreams of his i wonder if he thinks about him

what he thinks about him i wonder if he's still alive
haitham's father where he lives
i will not let myself wonder

if haitham is still alive if i'll ever see him again

The Lesson

khaltu amal who i guess is not my khaltu yet just amal
a bride-to-be stands facing my mother not yet

my mother just aisha in the newly gathered circle
of women some accompanied by drums

some clapping their two hands aisha dances & amal
tries to mirror her movements but cannot catch

the drumbeat my mother stops & works to rearrange
amal's posture just as she does with mine

back arched arms pulled back at the shoulder
like resting wings chin tilted skyward

try it again from the waist this time, not the legs slowly
good! now faster & as the dance arranges itself

into amal's formerly graceless body i see her face light up
in a smile not the strained grimace i've seen her wearing

all my life this one reaches her eyes & glows
& together she & aisha fall into step the others rising

from their chairs to join them one of them calls
to my mother *aisha graceful one they should have*

named you نعمة *nima grace* & my mother laughs
it's too late to change mine but maybe i'll save it for my daughter

The Lovers

the band plays its final soaring note & the party
releases its clamor of guests they pile into cars & onto
motorcycles & i try to memorize each face before
it absorbs back into history

my parents hand in hand set off on foot
& walk the wide road along the river
their chatter soft in the cooling air yasmeen & i
hurrying behind them trying to get close enough
to hear my mother's voice floats toward us
i think it's a girl a daughter her small hands
unchanged by the years touching her stomach in awe

& though his face creases a little in an expression
i do not know i quickly forget
because for the first time i am hearing
my father's voice deep & throaty
a pleasant growl wrapping itself around
my mother's name in wonder in disbelief
& with a whoop of excitement
he picks his beloved up by the waist their child
piecing together inside he spins her around
until they are both dizzy & helpless with laughter

Yasmeen

my parents just ahead of us walking hand
in hand & content the hot air
like a woolen blanket thick & comforting
even with the sweat glossing my brow
prickling in my armpits i turn to yasmeen
i have so many questions for you
i don't even know where to start
& she smiles *me too. can i go first?*
i nod & spend the rest of the walk answering her
about school & arabic class & my mother & haitham
& mama fatheya & khaltu hala about all
the contours of my small life the photographs
& old songs i collect i tell her about my loneliness
my mother's loneliness & i even
with a little pang of embarrassment tell her
about the music videos about dancing
& the way it makes me feel to forget my body
to imagine it freer & full of grace
& she listens rapt nodding & exclaiming
& asking more questions & it feels so good
to feel so interesting to be attended to
in her unblinking way & now my father is reaching
for the gate & i haven't gotten to ask yasmeen
a single question of my own

The House

we arrive outside a whitewashed house
where my father unlocks the gate

inside a tiled courtyard scattered
with potted flowers gnarled cacti

walls carpeted in bougainvillea
a jasmine tree thickly perfuming the air

my grandmother her face rounded
like my mother's hair still dark & streaked

with gray parted in two heavy braids
coiled around her ears waters the flowers

in her nightgown raises an eyebrow as the gate
swings open to let my parents inside

though her voice is full of mirth when she calls
home so early? & her daughter

& new son smile back she sets down her watering can
& labors to her feet bemoans her creaking knees

seated at the kitchen table over plates
of spiced beans sheep's cheese & charred

puffs of bread my mother shyly reveals
her news her mother’s ululating wakes the cats

& they slink unimpressed into the yard

Morning

my parents set off for bed & i fall into
a dreamless sleep right there
at the kitchen table arms folded to pillow
my racing head & wake to sunlight
like i've never seen so bright so saturated
it is almost a pigment almost the color
of marigolds & before i can convince myself
i've dreamt the whole thing yasmeen's voice
calls out behind me *you know you snore,*
right? i turn to see her crisp & uncrumpled
& polished & as i open my mouth to ask
if she'd even slept a movement outside the window
catches my eye my grandmother awake
& feeding the birds & in this perfect morning light
i see so much of my face in hers i almost think to love it

The Photographs

i wander out of the kitchen to explore the rest
of the quiet house its cool stone floors

its every wall hung heavy with pictures creased
with age & soft in gray tones men in neat suits

& cylindrical hats each one jaunty with its tassel
men in crisp white tunics a turban winding each head

& most of all photographs crowded with women
covered & uncovered some in sundresses

flared around the ankle enormous sunglasses
beehives & bouffants & big curls & coiffed waves

some swathed from neck to ankle in tobes their colors
lost to time & the gray scale of the camera

all of them my people all of them unknown
i peer into each face & feel for the first time

that i belong to other people my face just a collage
of all their faces & beyond the gray of the photos

i swear i see my exact shade of brown my exact
eyes each exact coil of my hair inherited

from the bodies in these photographs & now
my body mine my turn with these features

i turn to find yasmeen beside me gazing into these same
photographs hunger in her upturned face

Yasmeen

moved by the ache in yasmeen’s eyes & knowing
she must see it echoed in mine i put my hand on her arm
i don’t know how else to explain this connection i feel to
the girl with my face who longs for what i long for
whose smile is my smile & i am brimming with questions
where do you live? where did you grow up?
do you know how you got your name? she skips over
the first two & gets right to the name *it’s honestly so dumb*
mama just likes the flower that’s it i always wished
i’d gotten your name instead one that actually
means something & through her eyes my name takes on
a new polish like i am finally
holding it up to the light

Room

a song wafts down the stairs & yasmeen & i
pull ourselves from the moment to follow it

in a small room painted pool-water blue my parents
still in their party clothes are sprawled across
their unmade bed

staring up at the lazy turns of the ceiling fan their fingers
interlaced laughter & chatter interrupted
only to change the song

to remark *i love this one* & sing along to a few words
the room is cluttered records stacked on every surface

books balanced between them some tented open
to mark a page

my mother sits up cross-legged
on the patterned bedspread

do you think it's too early to call hala? i'm worried about her
& just then as if summoned the telephone
on the bedside table

starts to ring my father answers listening intently
answering only in short syllables *yes* *where?* *okay*

puts the receiver back into its cradle as he stands shoving
his feet into shoes buttoning his shirt he tosses

a simple gray scarf to my mother & says his voice strained *let's go it's hala they caught her with ashraf last night*

alone in his car

they've been detained the charge is adultery

Hala

we idle in the car outside a large white house
with blue shutters until another car arrives

screeching to a halt & a younger mama fatheya draped
in a brightly patterned tobe steps out

partway through what must have been a much longer speech
our whole family's reputation your father will be

the laughingstock of the university & how am i ever supposed
to show my face again i can't believe you'd be so stupid

what would you have done if i hadn't happened to have american
dollars for the bribe maybe it would have served you right if i'd

just left you to rot in that cell with that shameful boy
to serve out your sentence i should be hearing

some thanks some gratitude some kind of apology
khaltu hala sits unmoving on the passenger side

her hair which last night was long & lush thick with kink
& curl now shorn close against her skull

a bruise blooming over her left eye i feel already
full of seeing already the full weight of everything

i was never told everything that was kept from me
i turn to yasmeen & see my own shock mirrored in her face

Hala

inside the house is large & airy cool stone floors
gauzy curtains softening the blazing sun outside

mama fatheya retreats to her room her anger searing
& silent except for the eloquent slam of her bedroom door

in her own room khaltu hala sits bolt upright her eyes
bloodshot & tearless beneath the uneven shear of her hair

my mother sits beside her stricken & in the twitch
of her hand i see her deciding whether or not she can touch

her friend what comfort she can muster in the face
of this great rupture moments pass & finally

aisha exhales reaches her hand & rests it gently
on hala's shoulder & the stillness is broken

& hala crumples with an unearthly howl
into my mother's lap & in an echo of the scene

i last remember them in my mother gathers her
into her arms & rocks her in that familiar chant

i know i know i know

my father hovers in the doorway his posture unsure

& when hala starts to cry he averts his eyes

& does her the kindness of slipping wordlessly
from the room my mother catches his eye

in his retreat mouths *thank you*

Baba

we leave my mother to comfort khaltu hala
while yasmeen & i follow my father through his day

i can’t help but ache watching his face moving & full
of muscle replacing the frozen one i’ve memorized

from the photos we follow him & i learn the long gait
of his walk his tall & wiry frame his scent

of apples & smoke he stops at a small cafe packed
with men drinking tea & shouting & playing backgammon

at a table crowded with his friends he is greeted
with a cheer *ahmed!* & i feel tears in my throat

at the sound of his name almost lost to time
my mother never says it hardly ever

speaks of him & when she does refers to him
only as *your father* my father ahmed

sprawls into a chair & lights the cigarette he pulls
from behind his ear his eyes thick-lashed & alert

as he listens to story after story though he keeps
mostly quiet he keeps hala’s secret keeps the news

of the baby of me a secret & though he laughs
at every joke & though i am barely acquainted

with his face its movements & its moods i think i see
a tightness in the smile but i don’t know what to name it

Baba

as the table starts to empty my father rearranges
his long limbs & orders a glass of tea it arrives

with a thick snowfall of sugar at the bottom of the cup
he stirs looks into its amber depth & sighs

his eyebrows thick & unruly as mine
knit together while he wrestles with some thought

that troubles him his forehead furrowing tea cooling
& undrunk a man i recognize from the party joins him

apologizes for being late motions to the waiter
for another glass of tea & settles comfortably

into one-sided chatter with my father
the price of oil the price of bread his wife

aching for a child that will not come some friends
thinking of leaving for england others for egypt

saudi arabia canada he claps my father jovially
on the shoulder *why don't you & the wife come with us?*

soon there won't be any work left here
for anyone & i hear you get used to the cold

my father tries & fails to force a smile his face breaks
& i listen holding my breath ready for the pieces

to finally fit into place the story of why we left our country
our home & even america takes on a new luster

at the thought that baba chose it for us
that we were all meant to go together

to call a new country our home

The Coward

instead i watch my father tell his friend
that he is going to leave my mother

& he is going to leave me though i can barely
hear him over the throb of my own sinking heart

the roar of blood in my ears *i'm not ready*
i'm not i love her i do i just always thought

i'd get to be young a little longer maybe see the world
i've never even left this city this country & now we're having

this child & i don't think i want that i guess i never
thought my life would get so small so soon a child?

with what money? what house? she wants all three
of us crowded into that room? all three of us sleeping

in her childhood bed? in her childhood home?
& doesn't care how that makes me look how it makes me feel

all of it it's embarrassing i hoped we were going to get out
of this country people have started to go missing & now

the soldiers everywhere the raids we could have tried
to leave & live a different kind of life & now we're stuck

his friend studies him blows on his tea & takes a sip
so you come with us do you already have a passport?

Mama

as my father plans the details of his escape i drink in
one last look at his weak face to replace the picture

in my mind in the photographs & my heart
hurts again & again for my mother twirled in the street

by the coward she loves off imagining names
for the daughter she was always going to raise alone

& i feel stupid ashamed of the life i spent pining
for this stranger this man i never knew who never

wanted to know me this ghost i've measured my mother
against & now i know him & i know he was never mine

to miss even if he'd lived mama was always
going to be alone

i mourn her as i've come to know her always tired

unpinning her scarf after a long day at work to sleep alone
& wake up alone & do all of it over again

i turn to yasmeen *is this why i was sent here?*
to find out he never wanted me? to find out he was never

going to be there even if he'd lived? & again

a pang for my mother who i’ve spent my whole life

thinking of as half of an incomplete whole as my other
parent instead of my only yasmeen still has not spoken

so i continue *i think i’m supposed to see this*
to know that mama was always going to be all i had

to know that mama was always enough i feel the depth
& shape of my love for my mother in a wash of tears

& i need to see her again even this version
who is not yet mine

The Game

together yasmeen & i return to the house to find aisha
in the small living room carefully peeling a grapefruit

its bright smell filling the air she is draped across
a woven bed arranged with others around the room

a few mismatched chairs pulled in from other rooms
of the house for her gathering of friends

lazy hum of the ceiling fan above flies orbiting
like little moons the room smells sweetly of incense

& behind it the sharper scent of new paint a bowl of dates
is passed around each one wrinkled & leathery

in its caramel sweetness i take in the carved wooden
shutters ghostly light almost bursting behind them

my grandmother bustles about the younger women
soft flesh of her full upper arms hair oiled & brushed

to a shining ripple a fat braid coiled around each ear
henna black on her fingers & toes

henna a crimson highlight in her hair reddest
at the neat parting & two long scars burned ceremonially

down each of her cheeks an adornment from
a forgotten time

as we approach i hear my mother musing to khaltu hala
i love the idea of naming her nima but ahmed loves

the name yasmeen & you know it's my favorite flower
it'll remind me of mama's garden mama likes it too

says a daughter is an apple in her father's eye
& a flower in her mother's hair she laughs

& shakes her head & i go warm at the thought
of my name as mama's first choice

yasmeen is my father's daughter the father
i never needed

khaltu amal though not the one being spoken to
pipes up *yasmeen is the prettier name, aisha, no question*

& khaltu hala rolls her eyes her dislike for amal flavoring
the air around them & if only to be contrary

she shoots back *there's a guava tree in the garden too*
& i don't hear you trying to name the baby jawaafa

or after the doum tree or the lemon tree i think nima
has more character she stares at amal

as she pronounces this last word
someone produces a deck of cards *why don't we make*

a game of it? & with a smirk amal takes the cards
& starts to shuffle *if i win a round, that's one point for yasmeen*
you win a round & it's a point for nima my mother is quiet
at first wary then her face clears & she claps her hands

it'll be fun! best three out of five? but just for fun, okay?
i turn to catch yasmeen's eye but her face is stricken

i reach to touch her shoulder & she shrugs my hand away
& i am stung by her small rejection as the game begins

they're playing concan with speed & concentration
i've never seen not the clumsy & laughing way haitham & i

play it with mama fatheya who cheats shamelessly
gets up in the middle of the game to make tea

& loses half her cards in the couch cushions
amal's jaw is set hala's brow is furrowed

they play entirely in silence & with a grin amal sets down
a winning hand & hala makes a frustrated noise

from the back of her throat as amal caws
one point for yasmeen! & i feel that old hum in my body

yasmeen gasps & i follow her pointing hand
down to my feet except my feet are not there

& fear slices through me but before i can do anything
hala is shuffling the cards again

& the hum leaves my body my feet flicker back into place
as they begin the next round which hala wins

in just a few brutal moves slaps down her cards
& calls out *nima!* & yasmeen's arm is instantly gone

dread settles onto her face until the cards are shuffled again
& her arm blurs back into sight

the next round is longer tense & finally
with a grunt hala wins again yasmeen's body

dissolving from the waist down fearful tears pooling
in her eyes & remaining there even as the cards

are once again shuffled & her legs are restored
when amal wins the fourth round & i feel the ominous hum

in my body again i cast about in panic for a way
to stop the game i reach for the cards but have

no hands to grab them with & in a final surge
of desperation i aim my foot at the tea set

arranged beside the group mint leaves steeping
in a beautiful ornate ceramic pot & kick the entire tray over

onto the cards boiling tea splashing into khaltu amal's lap
her howl of pain the game forgotten

as the women scramble to their feet

what have you done? yasmeen hisses jogging
to catch up as i stride toward the gate

i feel unsettled & afraid something nagging at me
that i can’t name & i need somewhere quiet to think

Quiet

yasmeen pulls me by the hand before the sob escapes
my throat & leads me outside into the blazing day
& for a moment the noise washes over me
muffling the feeling

cars clatter by in a honking of horns & cough of exhaust
sharing the street with bleating animals pedestrians
crossing without looking to either side escaping narrowly

with their lives children crowd the car windows hawking
bags of peanuts sweet ropes of creamy white jasmine
& an old man whizzes past on a bicycle
barely missing yasmeen

who once again tugs at my hand *if we don't move out*
of the way we're going to get flattened
& it's true that everything feels too loud too bright
i just need a quiet place to think

i call to yasmeen over the commotion *i need a quiet place*
to think & yasmeen walks us in the direction of the river
to the skeleton of an unfinished building
a monster of gray concrete

its windows without glass like sockets missing their eyes
on a raised bit of land flush against the river its brilliant blue *wait* i
hesitate *i didn't mean, like,*

abandoned-building quiet

don't be stupid she replies & she's pulling me along again
into the building up one crumbling set of stairs *yasmeen,*
where are we going? i should probably tell you now that i don't

love heights as we climb another set of stairs *hold on,*
would you stop for a second? shouldn't we talk about what
just happened? without turning she calls back

here's this whole country we never got to see don't you want to see
everything? i feel the sweat prickling in my armpits
i can already see everything through this window
why don't we just stop here?

& she shakes her head *the roof i want to see everything*

A Country

i stumble coughing behind her onto the roof & before
i can slow my breath i feel it catch again in my throat
as i look out & see it the whole city the desert just beyond it
our whole country panoramic before us all the noise
softened by distance

i can just make out the sounds coming from a nearby minaret
a full-throated call to prayer below us the world is rendered
in every variation of brown sudden shocks of other
colors bougainvillea planted everywhere glossy green
of palm leaves & as the sun begins to set the colors seem
almost painted almost liquid true pink true orange
gold its magentas & oranges like fruit
i long to touch it to my lips

yasmeen & i are silent surrounded by what could
have been ours the street below wafting its perfumes
of car exhaust of corn & peanuts roasting
that ever-shifting smell of smoke
& for a moment i can forget my fear the memory
of my vanishing body how easily my name
could have been taken

instead i take in the colors the smells blue & gold
& unnamed sepia tones around us streets bustling
with my people with my family yasmeen beside me

squeezing my hand

Yasmeen

as the panic from the game leaves my body
i remember with a jolt why we'd gone back to the house

yasmeen, we have to tell mama that baba is leaving her
you don't understand what it's like her whole life

is like a shrine to him she has to know what he
was really like i turn to her *wait, but in your life*

they're together, right? what's he like? what changed?
her face takes on a hunted look & she will not meet my eyes

i feel desperate *why aren't you answering me? yes or no?*
are they together? we need a plan

maybe i could write her a letter

or whisper to her in her sleep or & yasmeen shakes
her head *we're not really here, remember? i already*

told you, they can't see us they can't hear us either
& i do remember yasmeen telling me at the party

we're only visitors, you understand? we're not part
of this part of time & i want to know why she knows

all this & i don't *yasmeen, what are you not telling me?*

how do you know all this? & how come i don't?

& the hunted look returns to her face i've caught her
in some kind of lie & i feel betrayed by everyone

my father making plans to make a life without me & now

this girl i've grown secretly to think of as my sister this girl
who brought me here i remember her leading me
through that day that already feels so far away

to the diner to the airport into the scene
of the photograph into this world

yasmeen, what are we doing here?

Half Possible

yasmeen sets her mouth in a hard line & just as i think
she isn't going to tell me she begins *there is only meant*

to be one of us & something tightens in my stomach
what do you mean? she takes a step closer

you just saw it for yourself there is no stupid parallel universe
our mother has one daughter & that daughter has one name

my stomach begins to twist itself into a knot as i think
back on her flimsy answers to every question

about her life now so obviously a lie always obviously
a lie that i was too hungry for her sisterhood to notice

distracted by the ways she'd turn the questioning on me
& make me feel interesting intoxicating me

with her unflinching attention but now
her words come flooding fueled by a new anger

rippling beneath the surface twisting our features
in her face *we're here because she's going to decide*

what to name the child it could have been any name
but the way the history worked out the choices come down

to nima & yasmeen you or me if she chooses yours
you go back to everything & if she chooses mine
your life becomes mine & you become like me
& she takes another step toward me i start to step back

& the wind circles us carrying with it the smell of the river
the water just below just behind me

yasmeen, what do you mean like you? what are you?
& something warps in her face

the ghost trapped between worlds the other fading
possibility that's why you'd go transparent every time

you wished yourself away you were making me more real
here i feel a prickle of fear crawl up my neck

right now you're only half possible & so am i
whoever's name she chooses gets to be her daughter

& she's too close to me now i look back nervous
yasmeen, this is really high can we talk about this downstairs?

& she looks like she is deciding something
a determined look settles onto her face our face

& she's lunging toward me

pushing me off the roof's concrete & into open air & as i fall
i scramble to grab her shirt pulling her behind me

A Single Possibility

we land with a hard smack into the sharp cold
of the river surrounded by floating trash submerged
in dirty water i struggle to keep my head
above the surface i kick my legs & pull my arms
my body heavy with soaked fabric yasmeen's grip tight
on a handful of my hair

the waves which looked so gentle from the shore
splash up into my face fill my mouth & sting
my burning eyes they pull me to the surface
as yasmeen submerges me again desperation
& panic mingling in her face as she forces me back
under the water

& i am so afraid i am almost calm the thoughts
unspooling slowly before me i understand her plan
to make herself the only option eliminate the other
& even when she saved me from that man at the hotel
it wasn't to save me it was to bring me here
she brought me here to leave me here
to return to my life as herself

she isn't my sister we are opposite ends of a single
possibility an only child forming in
our mother's belly waiting to be shaped by a name
once & for all whoever is chosen lives & whoever

is not is gone forever resolved by history
& so yasmeen of course yasmeen is trying to kill me

i scrabble at her hands now clamped around
my neck a knot gnarled & thick & i feel panic
fluttering the blood away from my fumbling fingers
i claw at her treading water until i can no longer feel
my legs i cannot sink i cannot die & leave my life to her
i cannot leave my loves to her my mother haitham
my country frozen in photographs my tin box of longing
the songs i love the dance my cassettes all mine
not hers mine

& in a final surge i kick my legs & as i pull myself free
from her grasp her foot catches on something under
the surface & she is pulled backward into the depths

Yasmeen

i watch her face disappear under the water & it is my face
etched with the same panic i feel coursing through me
& it feels like i am watching myself drown & i know
i should just let her go let myself become the only possibility eliminate the other

but i can’t just leave her there leave the body
that is my body to die

& everything feels slowed down the moment broken
into a string of smaller moments a tire floats past
& i lunge for it with one hand my other hand
feeling around then reaching under the water
for her long braid of hair

i pull hard & her head breaches the surface
coughing arms flailing grabbing first at me
& then understanding that i am trying to help
reaching desperately for the tire *my foot*
she yells hoarsely *it’s caught* & through
the murk of water i can just make out the net
snarled around her ankle

& of course the only way to free her is to suck in a breath
& go underwater try to keep my eyes open
against the sting & fumble at the net worked into
a knot with no give & through it all trust that she will not
try again to push me under

right as my lungs are ready to release their scream for air
i work the knot loose & the net falls away
into the dark depth of the water i come back up
& gasp hungry breaths each gulp of air dragging
sharp nails along my throat

yasmeen grabs my hand & helps me throw my arms
over the tire & together we kick our way back to shore

Yesterday & Tomorrow

we stumble along the riverbank
yasmeen limping beside me

i turn to her & fill with unexpected pity
at the sight of her struggling forward

shrunken by fear & somehow smaller than me
& somehow no longer a threat

no longer some ominous spirit
no longer any better than me any taller

her breath is ragged & i stop to let her rest
before we walk back along the road

vaguely pointed toward our parents' house
everything a little quieter in the approaching dusk

our dripping hair & clothes making us shiver
in the cooling air

i sneak glances at yasmeen hunched & unsure
silent in the awkward aftermath of our struggle

& i feel a surge of resentment
i curse my stupid sense of responsibility

to this spirit-girl who still probably wants me dead
who probably would not have saved me

if our places in the water
had been switched

who pushed me into it in the first place

she is quiet biting her lip
& seems to be squirming inside her skin

as i watch her before the anger dawns on her face
to match mine *you don't know what it's like for me*

living nowhere existing nowhere
stuck watching between worlds

watching you waste all the life you've been given
all that love you've been given

you have no idea what you have
& have the nerve to wish it all away

to wish yourself away you're the one
that summoned me, stupid

all this talk of wishing you'd been born me
instead of yourself you called me over

invited me to take the life & make it mine
since you clearly have no use for it

moaning & stuck obsessing over the past

some man that never wanted us to begin with

since you love yesterday so much
why not just stay here

watching history happen like some dumb movie
that doesn't need your participation

& let me do the work of actually living
of actually filling that life you've barely touched

she's right & i hate her for it
& the shame prickles at my warmed skin

as i think back to each time i wished myself gone
wished myself another life

leaving my mother & haitham
behind in the old one

twilight settles around us the darkening sky
simultaneously brilliant & deep

the moon a perfect orb suspended in the nameless color
& for a moment i look up in wonder

wishing yasmeen would leave me alone
to see the country that was kept from me

go away i hiss at her & she rolls her eyes
i wish i could but in case you haven't noticed, stupid,

i have to go wherever you do

our fates are bound until we figure this out

i promise i’m not hanging around because i like you
& the frustration builds

until i want to tear out my own hair
stop calling me stupid

Dusk

the sun has finished setting as we approach
the gate to the house to find my mother slipping out
alone & hurrying down the twilit street
sandals slapping against her heels

yasmeen & i jog to catch up to her just as the gate
to hala's house opens to let her in & we're barely inside
before the gate clangs shut
& hala is leading us around the side of the darkened house

we turn in to a back courtyard & the darkness is forgotten
in a cluster of chairs arranged under a string of lanterns
a buzz of laughter & talk & clinking glasses of mint tea

as aisha is whispering *you didn't have to host tonight*
with everything that's happened hala cuts her off
i already promised & it was too late to cancel it's fine

my mother holding court with her friends
laughing & teasing & talking more than i've ever heard her
i understand why people want to leave but i couldn't live

anywhere else away from everything i love it here
& i know things can get better but who will fix it
if we all leave?

khaltu hala laughs & calls her a nationalist & my mother
not yet my mother just aisha throws her head back
to join the laughter

then points up into the night sky *why go anywhere else*
when we have all the stars & another friend calls out
here comes the romance aisha's face is dreamy as she curls

both feet up into the chair sandals forgotten in the dust
imagine growing up here in our parents' time she muses
when the country was just born the elegant way our mothers
would dress

all the independence songs & all that promise hala pulls
the cigarette from her mouth & laughs again
my nostalgia monster here i miss haitham with a pang
i don't mean to interrupt the poem

but it's time to put some music on & a song
rings out into the night & aisha unfolds
her legs to dance

The Lesson

the song begins crackling through the speakers
يا حبيبي أنا عيان

& i love this one i sing it to myself & watch
aisha & amal & all the women i'll never know
swaying & clapping & tossing their hair around
to the song & when it's done something percussive
& powerful takes its place one of the traditional
dances i love & as my mother steps into
the center of the circle i feel myself rising
to echo her she strikes her foot against
the dust & i mirror her movements i bring
my hands to my face in the coy motion she taught me
& swing my hair from side to side i watch her
in her element & feel myself in mine something
in me clicks & stays put & i feel suddenly fluent
in my body in the knowledge that my waist will move
as i tell it to that my back will arch in the exact shapes
of hers & as i twist my head in time to the song's
final notes i catch yasmeen sitting up alert
watching me in awe *how do you do that?*
i keep moving as i answer *what do you mean?*
i don't know, i don't know what to call it it's like
you were the music like your body was the song
how do you do that?

& it begins to dawn on me slowly at first
then all at once *yasmeen, have you never*
danced? & she cuts her eyes at me
don't talk to me like you're sorry for me
in case you weren't following what i've been trying
to tell you i haven't exactly had a body
before this stupid little adventure so no
i guess i've never danced *before & wait*
no what are you doing & i am pulling her up
to join me her protests slowing as i arrange
her limbs as i turn to face her *okay, first*
with your right & at first her movements
are jerky uncomfortable but by the fourth song
her eyes are closed & the music has settled itself
into her muscles & the movements have begun
to take mirroring mine & a few feet away
my mother puts her body through the exact motions
the three of us in parallel

An Alternate Possibility

we sit in a new silence shy in the aftermath
of our brittle sisterhood watching the ebb & flow
of the party & eventually i've had my fill
even the thrill of the old songs i love not enough
to silence my racing head

i turn to yasmeen sprawled out in the dust beside me
catching her breath i nudge her with my foot & she scowls
sits up ready for another fight until i raise
my hands in surrender

i just wanted to ask you something i protest
& she flops back onto the ground & in her silence i press on
*i don't really understand your whole thing are you a jinni
or, like, some kind of spirit or something?*

*where were you before i started, i guess, summoning you?
were you trying to steal some other life?* she doesn't answer
& instead shoots back a question of her own

why did *you summon me? you have this whole big beautiful life
& you're just wasting it, wishing yourself out of it.
how could you not want it?* & i cast about for the words
to explain *it's not that i don't want the life*

*i love my mom & haitham & khaltu hala & mama fatheya
& there's a lot of stuff that makes me happy a lot of the time*

it's me i wish were different i love them & i guess part
of loving them is wishing i were better, a better

version of myself which i always imagined as you
but i guess you're not actually you? i still need
you to explain it to me. did i, like, invent you?
moments pass & she does not speak i lean forward
to ask again & she begins

i already told you i am an alternate possibility
trying to become a person i don't even know how
to explain it to you it's like i'm asleep for years at a time
until a living possibility starts to fade

& i see an opening the memory fades before i wake back up
i basically don't exist without some sort of animating mission
without the pursuit of being born that's all i want, you know
to be born

it's not even your life i want i just want a life any life
i want a person to become to wake me up for good
i want a body that is mine actually mine
a body i feel fluent in

do you actually understand how boring it is
waiting to be made possible?

A Life

yasmeen continues *all this stuff you love the music,*
the dancing, your mom, haitham i don't have any of it

i don't have anything like it & it's all i want

i want a favorite song & i want to know if a guava tastes
the way it looks i want to shine with sweat

& change colors in the sun i want to watch television

& memorize whole stretches of movie dialogue like you
& haitham do i want the feeling of sitting in hot water

& to be afraid of heights or dogs or the dark

i want to ride the bus & give someone directions
i want to shell pistachios & bite my nails & get the hiccups

from laughing too hard i want to shield my eyes from the sun
i want eyes that are mine to shield & skin that is mine

i want goose bumps & armpits that go damp & i want arms
that are too hairy or feet that are too large

or anything i'll take anything any version of a life

& with a gasp she sits up my features blurring out
of her face *i don't think i was supposed to tell you*

any of that

Yasmeen

her features flicker in & out like her whole body
is shimmering with static hair switching from color
to color different noses & eyes & mouths arranging
themselves for a moment before blurring out again

she shakes her head hard & the face settles for a moment
one gray eye & one brown mouth full of large
horsey teeth *this is bad* she whispers
a new nose shimmering in to replace the last one

Yasmeen

she begins stumbling around the party her every
warping feature pleading wordlessly to me for help

i scramble to my feet & hurry toward her just as
she crashes into a small table holding half-drunk glasses
of hibiscus juice

before careening toward another table holding
the cassette player & i watch in horror as she trips
over the cord knocking the source

of all the party's music to the ground & in the new silence
the guests have stopped dancing watching

as something they cannot see destroys the party around them
yasmeen's face is shining with tears as the body continues

to knock itself against a tree like it is trying to rid
itself of her & before i can reach her mama fatheya
emerges from the house

a clay incense burner in her hand billowing dense coils
of smoke reciting something i don't understand

i watch in horror as the smoke wraps itself around yasmeen
her scream an otherworldly sound & when the smoke
clears she is gone

Spirits

mama fatheya lifts an upended chair back into its place
& heaves herself into it as the younger women clamor
around her she waves away the proffered glass of water

no reason to worry, no reason to be afraid you all should know
what happens when you play loud music at twilight
when the veil between the spirit world & ours is thinnest
you'll call them to our side some of them are harmless
but i think this one was particularly nasty

& something in me bristles at hearing
yasmeen described like that like some sort of monster
hearing someone who doesn't even know her just decide
what she is what she's like & with a jolt of panic
i realize i don't know where she's gone if she's ever
coming back she isn't evil she didn't choose
to be this way

i am haunted by the memory of her scream the sound
of someone in terrible pain a pain she didn't deserve
when all she ever tried to do was live

Alone

in a corner of the garden i sink
into the soft dirt my back against the trunk
of a tree wafting gentle notes of jasmine
my heart's painful percussion showing no signs
at first of slowing until it finally does
& i am left in silence with yasmeen's absence

i thought i'd be relieved i no longer
have to fight for my name but i'm still here
with no idea how to leave how to go home
i'm left with no one else to talk to no one
who can see me & she was taken so quickly

i've lost her & the loss takes its place
among my other losses & breaks my heart
in new ways i could have helped her
i've always been the one with everything
i've always been the one with something to give

Alone

time passes & the ruined party continues to disperse
a few stray guests help rearrange the fallen furniture

& gingerly gather the scattered shards of glass
i don’t know where to go i don’t know what comes next

& the weariness i’ve staved off for what feels like days
finally soaks into my body i want to go home

to my mother my life my world where there is room
for me my world where i have a name where i am not alone

& in the midst of this thought something is pulling me
to my feet hands that feel solid as my own

but as i look around wildly
i see no one there

Yasmeen

nima, it's me & the voice is yasmeen's *we don't have*
a lot of time but i'm here to help *i don't have much longer*

but i want to get you home & i hear the tears in her voice
i tighten my hold on the hand in mine *yasmeen, wait*

there has to be some way & she cuts me off *i don't want it*
anymore *your life* *i don't want to take it from you* *it's yours*

& i can't help but feel stupid for talking tearfully into thin air
but i continue *yasmeen, there has to be some way i can help*

& her voice takes on a stubborn knot i can almost picture
the way she shakes her head the new expressions

she would make of our familiar features *nima, listen to me.*
i don't know why i'm like this. i don't know what it all means.

i don't know how to change anything & i don't know anything that
matters *except that i can help you get home.*

i've never wanted to do anything good before, really,
but you're good & you're kind & you're so full of love

my face gets hot as she says this *shut up & let me finish,*
i mean it *even after i literally tried to kill you, you didn't*

think twice about saving me you learned this huge thing about
your dad & instead of knocking a hookah over onto his stupid lap,

your first thought was about helping your mother
& i don't know, it taught me something so anyway

could you just shut up for a second & let me do my good thing?
& as she mentions baba & the cafe the idea slams into me

yasmeen, what if we find you a life you don't have to steal?
she's silent for a second & i take this as permission

to keep going & hope it doesn't instead mean
she's gone again *yasmeen? i'm here.*

what do you mean a life i don't have to steal?

it might not work but we have to try. but is there a way for you
to be less invisible? i can't concentrate when i keep thinking

you've disappeared & as she flickers back into my sight
her face is once again my face

but rendered in gray scale like an old photograph

The Plan

yasmeen stumbles along beside me
blurred again around the edges
her fingers going increasingly transparent
where are we going? & how do you know this
is going to work? & also while we're here could you not
say things like 'a life you don't have to steal' like you think
you're better than me? i look over warily but she's smiling
playful & i join her *i'm not saying i'm better but look*
you're the one who called me 'full of love' & i can tell
i've embarrassed her i steel myself for another fight
until just in time the cafe looms again
before us not yet emptied for the night

The Cafe

we slip inside unseen & weave between
the tables yasmeen opens her mouth
to protest & i shush her striding back
toward the table where my father sits
with his friend with a pang i look away
from him planning his departure & i turn
to yasmeen *remember what his friend was saying*
before they started planning the big escape?
he & his wife want a child & the child won't appear
is that enough possibility for you?

the plan dawns solidly on her restored face reanimating
with its new mission the man rises from the table
& drains his glass shrugs into his jacket
& claps my father on the shoulder
before slouching toward the door
i pull yasmeen into a hug tears pricking in my throat
go with him go get born go get a body
& before she can speak
i've pushed her out the door behind him

Yasmeen

i stride triumphant back toward
my grandmother’s house glowing with
the victory of hopefully saving yasmeen
no longer my sister never actually
my sister maybe never to be seen
again but alive somewhere alongside me
our paths untangled & moving in tranquil parallel
i miss my strange almost-friend her strange
& supernatural company but i hope i’ve saved her
& now i need to find a way to make my name my own

Leaving

i pass through the gate into the garden
& feel my stomach knotting tightly when
i realize i never asked yasmeen how
to warn my mother & before i have
a plan as if summoned my mother emerges
my father close behind her his face
tight & expressionless as she reaches for his hand & says
i missed you today i hope the cinema will cheer you up
& for lack of a better idea
when she passes me i lean in & hiss into
her ear *don't trust him he's going*
to leave you & step back as she startles
& gazes frantically about to find of course
nothing & she climbs looking troubled
into the car

Breaking

i watch them argue through the window
her face shining with tears his knuckles
sharp as he grips the steering wheel

he does not look at her & as she motions
to her stomach with a plea he strikes
the dashboard says something curt
& cutting & i watch her mouth open
then close she lowers her head
& the tears pour silently into her lap

The Officers

before she can unlock the door to exit
a white pickup truck piled high
with young men in fatigues screeches
to a halt beside my parents' little car

five officers debark & crowd toward
the window on my father's side one knocks
maliciously on the glass & leans down
grinning when the window lowers & they all
see the beautiful girl in the passenger seat

who is this woman? they call into the window
& my father collecting himself replies
she is my wife *no way, so young* another
officer mocks *we'd like to ask her a few*
questions licking his chops like a wolf

my father begins to ease the window back up
until one of the men blocks it with the butt
of his rifle snarls *we want to ask her*
some questions then *give us the girl & you*
can leave & it all goes still & silent
as i remember my mother's story *they shot him*
& i lift a large rock from the others strewn on the road
& aim it hard into the knot of men they scatter
& peer into the dark the car has not moved so i heave

another rock & narrowly miss an officer’s face

they draw their guns & begin to shoot i seize up in fear
until i see every bullet passing through me like air
& lodging into tree trunks parked cars clanging
into the tin gates of houses & in the clamor my father
slams his foot down on the car’s accelerator & speeds off
the rifle stuck & rattling against the window its officer
jogging along with it until he loses his footing
& falls into the street & my father does not die

Leaving

when the road is emptied & quiet the car
inches slowly back toward the house my father
helping my shaking mother through the gate & into
the courtyard where they cling to each other
in a long embrace until her sobs have quieted

stay she pleads *or let me come with you*
what happened to us? we love each other
you love me stay & he will not look at her
instead just shakes his head & leaves her
frozen in the courtyard as he strides into the house

Gone

i stand rooted with my mother in the courtyard
as she is racked by new tears & i also

can't believe that he's gone i thought i'd helped
i thought i'd fixed it our broken history full

of loss full of people & places once loved
& now simply gone i thought i'd stolen one back

to our side reclaimed one of our losses
from history's sharper teeth from time's gaping mouth

but i was wrong he was never meant to be ours my father
he was always meant to be gone it was always bigger

than anything my small tampering could change
& my mother & i were always meant to belong

to no one but each other

Left Behind

my mother is crumpled in her bed the pillow
on my father's side undisturbed & smooth
his few clothes & books & records tossed into
the little car & gone no one to rub her back
& wipe her face as she convulsed all night with grief

hours pass & the afternoon fills the room with slants
of yellow light a small knock goes unanswered
then another & finally khaltu hala slips quietly
into the room sits sad & quiet at the edge of the bed
considering the hurt radiating from my mother's curled form

they stay in silence for a long moment hala
places a palm on my mother's searing forehead & tears
start pouring down the sides of my mother's upturned face
pooling in her ears down her neck

by sunset khaltu hala convinces her to sit up
& sip water feeds her pieces of cut fruit & listens
humming in sympathy as my mother tells her tale
& by the end her face is creased with worry as my mother
says quietly *i can't raise his child alone all she*
will do is remind me of him i have to give her away
& my stomach aches into a knot & i wonder
if i've made everything worse

twilight darkens the room & hala rises to leave
mama is sending me away to america
i have to go home to pack & listen my mother
raises her eyes to hala without speaking *aisha, come with me*
i won't leave you here alone & i'll be so alone without you
let's go & start over away from everything that hurt us

The Baby

when hala is gone i take her seat at my mother's bedside
& pass hands she cannot see across her face
over her hair

she stiffens looks wildly around the room cries out
in the wrong direction *who is that? who's there?*

it feels wrong to scare her but i need to change her mind
mama i plead *it's me* *your daughter* *it's me*

& i call to her my name *i'm your daughter*
i need you *we have a whole life together* *together*

you're all i need *not him* *you're all i need* *please*
& my mother slows her frantic search around the room

& looks awed down at her stomach touches it
reverently & in the quiet wraps her voice around
my name

nima repeats it like a prayer *nima* *nima*
my saving grace & as she says my name a chasm

opens where once lay my father's abandoned pillow
colors swirling as if in water before settling

into a scene i peer into the opening & see the bathroom

of our apartment water running into the tub about

to overflow i look back at my mother hurt but surviving
cradling her belly crooning my name to herself *nima*

PART 3

HOME IS NOT A COUNTRY

The Portal

the gap in this world is pulling me toward it
like a current inside it the bathtub has begun
to overflow glistening onto the tile
& i don't know if i'm ready to leave i have
so much left to do to see i have to study
my grandmother's long-lost face learn the lives
of all those i didn't know before their great losses
the men in the band i want to know what happens
to haitham's father if he is ever seen again
i want to know why they all left & undo all the damage
undo the wars the hunger the kidnapped women
& jailed men returning months later looking hollowed out
hair shorn close against their skulls i want to fix it all
i want to help in this world where i don't feel so helpless
so hunted where i don't have to watch haitham's
broken face without knowing if he's still alive
behind it where my arabic flows easily
from my throat & the athan rings out five times
a day from the minarets in a voice husky with magic
i want to eat guava & skip stones into the stinking river
i want to watch my mother's youth her dancer's
walk her life vibrant with friendship & parties
styled like a film star in her yellow dress not tired
not at work & instead laughing dancing
clapping along to all the songs she loves her unbroken

country pulled warm around her & i fight hard
against the portal’s pull i reach to grip a bedpost
& my hands move clean through it like it’s water
i grab at everything around me as it dissolves back
to history my feet now submerged to the ankle
in the chasm i make one final
reach for my mother’s frozen arm & it blurs away
the portal moving up my legs to swallow me whole

The Portal

the portal is uncomfortably hot pulls me by its current
toward the other side & all around me
swirling like autumn leaves are hundreds
of photographs i've never seen
arriving to paper the walls of the tunnel

in one my mother pregnant at the airport
smiling hugely into her new life in another
my mother cradles a tiny baby in awe
one taken the winter when i first befriended haitham
when my mother bought me a new coat & shivered
every day in her layers of sweaters my mother
folding me tiny paper boats to float in the bathtub
my mother demonstrating a movement to a group of girls
twisting to mirror it my mother smiling broadly
beneath a sign that reads *traditional dance classes by aisha*
my mother in a newspaper clipping whose caption reads
founder of local dance troupe banat al-nima describes dance
as her connection to a lost home & in every photo
my hand is clutched tight in hers or around her leg
or tugging on her hem in every photo we are together

not a single one where either one of us is alone & in a rush
of warm air the portal deposits me feetfirst & fully clothed
into the bathtub splashing water over the sides
my mother knocking frantically outside the bathroom door

Home

i call to her & i hear her voice weighted with relief a sob
catching in her throat *you're here you're here*
i thought i'd lost you where have you been all day?
& i heave myself out of the tub to unlock the door
dripping a trail of bathwater behind me

my mother pulls me to her my wet clothes soaking hers
her tears spilling into my hair & the words pour out
in both languages from my mouth *i'm sorry i'm sorry*
you're all the family i need you're all the parent i need
i'm sorry thank you for making us this life from nothing
thank you for choosing me i'm sorry i choose you too
i choose you you're all i need you're all of it
& we stand like this clasped & sobbing
until i start to shiver in my still-drenched clothes
she wraps me in a towel sends me
to my room to change

The Photographs

& in the apartment outside all but one of the photographs

of my father have disappeared replaced instead by the ones

from the portal the one with me as a newborn

framed in the living room

the one at the airport taped to the mirror

of my mother’s dresser

in the one on the coffee table we perch

by a bathtub crowded with paper boats

& in the absence of his face i finally pay attention

to the others all over the apartment

that have been there all along

my grandmother my mother surrounded

by friends & smiling enormously into the camera

my mother grinning beside khaltu hala

my mother holding a bouquet of flowers

surrounded by girls in dancers' clothes

what is newest is a poster advertising

the banat al-nima dance school & on it a photograph

of my mother midstep & across from her

in the exact movement is me

& when i pull my tin box from beneath the bed

the one photograph remains my parents at the party

& with it is a new one of my mother here in america

in full color at some recent party yellow dress

swirling bright around her head thrown back

her mouth open midlaugh or midlyric

arms stretched above her head

as if in victory aisha bright & full of living

The Kitchen

i change into dry clothes & emerge from my room
to see my mother in the kitchen cutting fruit a pot
of lentils rioting on the stove i watch her quietly
drinking her in she looks younger less tired
less stooped around the shoulders undefeated

she turns her head & catches me looking smiles
holds up some tupperware & nods toward the pot
of food *i thought we'd take this to the hospital*
& have dinner with haitham's family & the world i left
behind begins steadily to fade as i rejoin mine
& in my world haitham is in the hospital his body broken
struggling to stay alive & i fight the urge to dissolve
into tears into hopelessness over the fact
that i've changed nothing that matters i clench my jaw
to keep back the sobs & join mama in the kitchen
to scrape the burnt bits of rice at the bottom of the pot
haitham's favorite into a separate container
for when he wakes up i reply to her glance

Haitham

when i met you we were so small so miraculously
unhurt unawoken by the dreams that make our mothers
scream out at night the whole world our private joke
the whole world a playground for our twinned brains
your perfect heart its daily forgiveness of my uglier one

when i met you i had a father or at least i had the dream
of one to lull me every night to sleep
photos to study to imagine separated only
by the spirit world's veil a father who would
choose me & would have if he could have stayed
but now i have so much more i have so much to tell you
wake up i have so much left to say

when i met you we were such children believing neither
of us could ever die won't you wake up wake up
& believe it with me again

Haitham

i approach haitham's bedside my mother busying herself
unpacking the dishes his mother & grandmother each
in her own gnarled sleep in a chair

i don't know if i'm allowed to touch him if it will hurt him
they've taken the tube from his mouth & his lip
has healed a little though his eyes stay closed
& solemn & i can't tell if he's breathing i lean in
to listen for a heartbeat for a breath
& his voice bubbles out unchanged
excuse me, a little personal space & i feel
like my heart just shot up to my throat
i straighten to look at him & his eyes
are wide open wide awake his grin
threatening to split his lip back open i squeal
& laugh & burst into tears

i'm sorry i wail & he cocks an eyebrow
winces a little & straightens his face *sorry for what?*
& when i reach for the memory of our argument it's like
trying to remember a dream like trying to carry water
in a cupped palm all of it trickling slowly away *i…*
you… i… i can't really remember
i blurt out sheepish he looks at me
mock-serious *did you also get kicked in the head?*
then laughs his enormous laugh

Haitham

when i met you i was already angry so angry
about everything i thought had been taken from me
everything i thought i did not have so busy looking
at my one empty hand i almost missed everything
filling the other

i think i spent a long time hating myself thinking
of myself as not enough thinking i was loving
everyone i loved by wishing a better version of myself
into their lives one more deserving more graceful

i think i could have been a better friend to you
instead of locking myself away inside my head
& invented memories locking myself away
inside the old photographs the old songs
& letting my whole life happen without me

is what i want to say but all i can manage is
i'm here now & i want to do better
& i'm sorry & i missed you & thank you,
thank you for waking up & haitham looks
for a moment like he is about to make a joke
& then miraculously doesn't
instead says simply *nima, you're my best friend*
but of course can't help himself *but didn't*
the doctor tell you not to make me cry

& i am already smothering him in a hug
pressing tighter & marveling at him so solid
& alive until i hear his muffled *ouch*

Home Is Not a Country

i’ve returned to my life only to find that things
aren’t all that different i go to school & wave
at haitham in the hallways & eat my lunch alone
in the company of others eating their lunches alone
though this morning while i make yet another
tragic sandwich my mother appears her face
determined & sets something neatly wrapped
in paper towels on the counter before me

nima, please, enough with those awful sandwiches
will you take this instead? it’s cheese like i know
you like, but it’s feta & i heated some pita & there’s
fuul & tomato in there too i can’t keep imagining
my daughter at school eating that plastic here she
casts a grim look at the neon slices of cheese
in their individual sleeves & i feel a dread
i hadn’t realized i was carrying dissolve as i imagine
myself eating a lunch that doesn’t make me want
to cry

The Singer

at the bigala my mother haggles with the shopkeeper
seriously? for just the one leg of lamb? can you prove

to me it descended from isaac? while i browse
along the shelf of tapes selecting two & bringing them

to the counter the shopkeeper barely glancing at me
before turning probably to shout back at my mother

but does a double take he lifts one of the cassettes
to the light *oh, i love this one* & sings dreamily

to himself in a voice like honey يا حبيبي أنا عيان
& i recognize behind the scowling face i've always known

that singer from the party the looseness of his limbs
his freedom but it already feels like something from

a dream or an old film i watched once then lost to time
but still i say *you have a beautiful voice, uncle*

& my mother twinkles up at him *you didn't know?*
back home he was something of a celebrity

& the laugh softens his grizzled face as he wraps the lamb
up for my mother & hands it to her *consider it a gift*

for the dancer & her daughter

Nima

& now on saturdays my mother teaches her class
rows of girls in all our people's sepia shades

arranged eagerly before her in our living room
the furniture pushed back into the corners

as they learn all the shapes & the songs
& the particular language of the drum

i love to watch her teach & love it more when she calls
me out of my room to demonstrate one thing

or another *watch nima* she'll say
& i'll feel the eyes warming my skin

as i reach for the song & wrap it tightly around me
& my body responds in its language

Yasmeen

we're back in arabic class haitham's stitches healed over
& his cast covered in scribbled signatures
stickers & cartoons & though it's his left
when the teacher brings over a quiz

& tries to hand haitham the sheet he lifts his cast
& announces *this is my writing hand, sir*
& is excused from all work until it heals

when the teacher turns i shove him in his
good shoulder *liar* *you're never going to learn*
any arabic & he looks over face contorted
in pretend heartbreak *my arabic is perfect* *listen*
نار يا حبيبي نار we collapse into laughter
before he finishes the lyric

& hear a third voice laughing with us a girl sitting
behind haitham leans forward over her desk
her round face is full of mischief eyes big & dark
& already in on the joke

her lips stretch into a smile full of large
white teeth gilded in multicolored braces
she smells faintly of sesame & flowers
something about her distantly familiar
though i can't place it

& as if to answer the question i haven’t yet asked
she holds out her hand acting out a serious
handshake *hi, i’m new, my name’s jazzy*
& haitham raises an eyebrow

that’s not arabic, is it? come on, what’s
your passport name? & she makes a face
everyone calls me jazzy or jazz
except my mom when she’s mad then
she calls me yasmeen

Jazz

sits between me & mama fatheya on the couch
both of them engrossed in the same cooking show
while haitham sits by our feet trying & failing
to work a series of objects under his cast
to scratch his arm during commercials
jazzy rouses mama fatheya with her perfect arabic
& just as i feel a strange & ancient jealousy
unfurling in my chest
she turns to me & grins *i hear you're some kind*
of nostalgia monster so i come bearing an offering
& from the pocket of her jacket she extracts
an unlabeled tape
did you know our arabic teacher was in a band back home
with a bunch of the uncles from the building? & would you
believe they were actually good? there's an amazing cover
of this sayed khalifa song on here that i love
& we are instantly kindred she unfolds
her long legs from the couch & reaches
for my hand & as i grab it i feel a familiar
pressure in her grasp
that familiar scent floral & earthy
& echoing with something
i know i've known but have forgotten
& i blurt out *not to be weird but i feel*
like i know you from somewhere

haitham looks up from attending to his arm
& calls out *all these love songs are making you such a romantic* to which yasmeen laughing replies *shut up can't you see we're having a moment, stupid?*
& for a second her voice wrapped around the word
is almost a memory almost a song from another life
& when i reach for it it is gone
as the old cassette player
crackles out the song وين الحلوين وين راحوا
where are the beautiful ones where did they go

Yellow

my dreams are vivid a world of blue & sepia
the smells of guava & smoke car exhaust & charred peanuts
a city built around two rivers the site of their joining
faces vaguely familiar brown skin shining with sweat
with perfumed oil a song that never stops playing
thick gnarl of a doum tree bright shock of bougainvillea
eloquent stink of that faraway river

& then i wake up pale sunlight streaming in
& the room lights up around me photographs taped
to the wall above my bed cassettes & cds shelved messily
in the far corner an arabic workbook splayed
on the floor filled with earnest cursive scrawls

i sit up & blink away the last of the dream
its colors retreating outside the day is unseasonably
warm i float sleepily into the morning
brushing my teeth splashing water
onto my pillow-creased face the kitchen wafting warm
& milky smells & back in my room spread
like a ray of sunlight across the unmade bed
is mama’s yellow dress calling to me almost
by name i rush toward it with a squeal
of excitement hurry out of my pajamas & slip it over
my head & the silk shimmers around me
like something liquid

i turn to the mirror & twirl like the girl in the photograph
like aisha before me & midspin i catch her standing
in the doorway the beautiful girl who became my mother
her face buoyant & alive as she claps her hands *oh, nima*
you were made for that color & i feel warm in the yellow
in my belonging to her as she names me *my precious girl*
my graceful one

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Aris Theotokatos

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